

UNCOVERING COMMUNITY IN THE QUEER AMERICAN UNDERGROUND:
THROUGH GEORGE KUCHAR AND LGBTQ+ ZINES

By

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ABSTRACT

This project carves out some of the characteristics specific to the queer underground film movement and uncovers the importance of community and collaboration in the inception, longevity, and resilience of the movement. In close reading film criticism from the time, as well as distinctions present in the film works, I explicated four main characteristics of the queer underground film movement and the surrounding community: shamelessly amateur aesthetic/filmmaking, LGBTQ+ themes and vulgarity, unseriousness, and community and collaboration, as well as labeling and defining a Queer Disgust Aesthetic. These characteristics and aesthetics are present in the film works of the queer underground film movement and are shared with the larger queer underground community, as evidenced in the LGBTQ+ zines. Through geographic mapping and a place-oriented take on the queer underground film movement, I trace the reverberations of the initial boom of the movement in 1960s NYC outwards over time and space by way of George Kuchar's videos and travels and LGBTQ+ zines that circulated via post throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The expansiveness of queer underground communities and hubs are uncovered by the geographical mapping, and we can take the spattering of communities across coastal, inland, urban, and rural spaces to reflect a resilience in queer underground communities, creation, critiques, and sensibilities.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Elusive terms and concepts like “queer,” “underground,” and even “queer underground” are alluring in their refusal to be pinned down; they beg for definition but thrive in unknowability. While many scholars have mastered the specificities of the underground film movement of the 1950s and 1960s in America, the queer underground film movement has continued to go undefined, unspecified from the overarching trend. In many ways, there will always be an unknowability in the queer underground film movement and community, as it will always be responding to a mainstream and/or Hollywood cultural/political/filmic standard that changes over time. However, it is the goal of this project to begin to categorize and define specificities of the queer underground film movement, its aesthetics, and how its characteristics spread across the country to engender community amongst queer folks who rejected and criticized the mainstream. While I am not offering a universal taxonomy of the queer underground, the characteristics I define allow for us to begin parsing out some of the elements of the queer underground that have been overlooked. In particular, I use these characteristics and geographic mapping to explicate the role and importance of community in the spread and resilience of the queer underground film movement. Community is one of the elements of the queer underground film movement that can tend to be overlooked, especially since much of the scholarship on underground film highlights the individuality and personal-ness of the films. David E. James puts it succinctly, “there are almost as many different kinds of underground films as there are underground film-makers.”¹ Due to the expansiveness of scope and individual expression, the (queer) underground film movement can very easily be studied in piecemeal,

¹ James, David E. *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, 95.

with focus on specific works and their creators, as opposed to looking at the surrounding community that made these personal expression films possible.

In exploring the queer underground film movement, though, the role of community needs to be prioritized. Queer theorist, Elizabeth Freeman, writes, “sexual minorities are stranded between individualist notions of identity on the one hand and on the other a romanticized notion of community.”² This “stranded” experience leaves many queer folks searching for their community, and oftentimes leads queer people to migrate to coastal and urban regions that have larger and more visible LGBTQ+ populations. This is the popular narrative, as Kath Weston shows in “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration,” with her research on coming-out stories – that the young, unknowing queer person imagines the urban space as a space of community and the rural as a space devoid of queer people.³ And while this narrative is just that – a narrative – it is necessary to disrupt and to show how resilient queer communities are and how they can crop up in spaces across the country, rural, urban, coastal, or inland. The queer underground film movement and its influence on the larger queer underground community can be key in disrupting these coastal and urban focuses, as this project aims to show how queer underground communities formed around the movement and throughout the country, by way of film screenings, zines, college institutions, and more.

To trace the specificities of the queer underground film movement and the communities and ideas that arose out of it, this project relies on two main sources: queer underground filmmaker, George Kuchar, and LGBTQ+ zines circulated in America in the 1980s and 1990s.

² Freeman, Elizabeth. “Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory.” Essay. In *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, edited by George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry, 295–314. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 197.

³ Weston, Kath. “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (June 1, 1995): 253–77.

As one of the fresher faces in the NYC Underground in the 1960s, Kuchar has a history that stems back to the original boom, but he also went on to teach Underground Drama at the San Francisco Art Institute for almost 40 years. Furthermore, his body of video-works follows his cross-country travels throughout his life, showing an expansive queer underground community spanning from his early days in the Bronx through screening his films at a variety of colleges and film festivals, as well as the community created from his educator role at SFAI. Kuchar, his long career, and his travels act as an archetype, representing a pattern of how some filmmakers continued spreading the spirit of the queer underground throughout their career, expanding the movement beyond the timeframe of the 50s and 60s, and beyond the central hub of NYC.

The LGBTQ+ zines are representative of the larger, encompassing queer underground community, and highlight how the characteristics of the film movement were integrated and undertaken by the community. Zines, at their core, are focused on connecting “like-minded misfits,” and beyond that, tended to have a critical lens aimed at society, or as Stephen Duncombe says in *Notes from Underground Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, “In zines, everyday oddballs were speaking plainly about themselves and our society with an honest sincerity, a revealing intimacy, and a healthy ‘fuck you’ to sanctioned authority.”⁴ This means that zines, and specifically LGBTQ+ zines, are especially useful sources for insight on potential audiences, the queer underground communities and networks they built, and the sentiments that delineated this community from a more mainstream and/or straight population. Furthermore, film scholar David E. James argued in *Allegories of Cinema*, that the underground film movement consisted of two forks, one of which was tethered to more marginalized subcultures.⁵ I argue that

⁴ Duncombe, Stephen. *Notes from Underground: Zines and The Politics of Alternative Culture*. Portland, OR: Microcosm Publishing, 2017, 7.

⁵ James, David E. *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, 165.

the queer underground film movement, then, is representative of this fork and was in fact tethered to the more critical and rebellious subsects of the LGBTQ+ community – the queer underground community. For this project, the LGBTQ+ zines are utilized to show how the characteristics of the queer underground film movement were integrated and spread throughout queer underground communities by way of the postal service, across and throughout rural, urban, coastal, and inland spaces.

Here, the zines offer insight that Kuchar cannot, as they provide a more expansive scope of the community that formed around and with the movement and represent potential audience members and communities beyond just the core network of filmmakers from the queer underground film movement. They also represent new and younger generations invested in the characteristics and sensibilities offered by the queer underground film movement and show how those sensibilities were taken up to critique social and political sentiments at the time, specifically around the AIDS epidemic and the attack on queer and/or LGBTQ+ art by way of the NEA and obscenity cases. The LGBTQ+ zines show how the queer underground film movement inspired and informed the larger queer underground community and presents the resilience of the characteristics and sensibilities of the movement by applying them to current events of the 1980s and 1990s. By geographically mapping the LGBTQ+ zines, we can see an expanded representation of the queer underground community that includes members beyond the filmmakers. And when the LGBTQ+ zine map and the Kuchar map are analyzed together, it uncovers another space of respite for queer underground communities: the college institution. In this mapping, I argue that the queer underground film movement was not only more geographically and temporally expansive than the current film scholarship suggests, but also that

it was a community-driven movement, and that network of community requires further exploration.

To begin, I will trace the history of the term, “underground,” within film scholarship and criticism, specifically in regard to the American film underground. This will lead me to a close reading of the queer underground, utilizing Suárez’s inclusive argument, as well as criticism from Jonas Mekas and Parker Tyler to eke out some of the distinctions between a broader underground and a more specific queer underground. Here, I will extract four key characteristics of the queer underground film movement that will inform the remainder of the project.

Underground: Tracking the Term

Estimations and definitions of what specifies an American Underground film and/or filmmaker have been debated since the origin of the term, by both film critics and film scholars alike. Jonas Mekas, Stan VanDerBeek, Manny Farber, among many others have contributed to the trajectory of this term within American film studies, but as of yet there is still a nebulous element to what exactly marks work as underground, or potentially more specifically, queer underground. These two terms, underground and queer underground, are complicated to untangle, if that is even the goal. While the underground may speak specifically to filmworks that were created outside of the realm of Hollywood, with little funding, and representative of a personal statement, as Sheldon Renan would argue in *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*, the prefix of “queer” may require some further elaboration. In Juan A. Suárez’s *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars*, he lists Queer subcultures as an element of pop culture that was one of the integral influences on underground cinema in the 1960s. This along with the inclusion of a number of key queer filmmakers in the underground, like Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, etc. would suggest that there may actually be no need for the

prefix of “queer” here, and that in actuality, queerness may be an intrinsic element at play in the American underground film tradition. However, there are moments in the work of Jonas Mekas as well as Parker Tyler that may welcome a kind of dividing or categorization between what may be a more encompassing underground versus a queer underground. This project is invested in pressing upon those slippages to begin to parse out what may be more specifically queer in the underground.

First, to understand how these conversations and definitions of the underground came to fruition, it is important to address the historical and societal context of the time. Film movements like these come out of specific contextual landscapes that encourage and push folks to find a way for their voices to be heard, and the American underground was no different. In America, the 1950s saw a return to conservative gender ideals following the end of WWII in 1945, as well as a significant increase in consumer goods due to the post-war economic boom. While there was an era of prosperity, what became more and more clear was the disparities in who saw the fruits of this prosperity. Furthermore, the widespread availability of the television led to the Golden Age of Television, wherein many of these family-centered, conservative ideals were disseminated through shows like *Leave it to Beaver* and *I Love Lucy*. These mainstream narratives ignored so many livelihoods, and over time created a pressure for underground creators to make the kind of content that themselves and their communities were missing. Thus, the 1960s, while starting with promise with the election of John F. Kennedy, became a decade of tumult and rebellion, including Kennedy’s assassination, The Vietnam War, the explosion of the Civil Rights movement, the passage of the Equal Pay Act, the Stonewall riot, the sexual revolution, and more. Furthermore, the Hays Code, which dictated what could and could not be shown in major motion films, remained in effect until the end of the 1960s, which meant that mainstream film was

highly controlled and not representative of the modern-day realities. These social upheavals paired with the limitations on television and mainstream film studios created a deep need to make art and alternative, underground film that could work around these guidelines and present their personal perspectives that opposed the conservative, mainstream ideals. Suárez addresses this connection, writing:

As to their ideologies, 1960s underground filmmakers did not share an orthodoxy or a prescriptive belief system, as was the case, for example, with historical avantgarde collectives; instead, they outlined their cultural politics through spontaneous alliances with and rejections of existing aesthetic and ideological traditions. The underground's oppositional thrust can be associated thematically and ideologically with other waves of dissent of the 1960s, such as youth movements, sexual liberation fronts, civil rights organizations, and the forms of protest and social experimentation often referred to as the "counterculture."⁶

This “oppositional thrust” was part of a larger social unrest in America, and it aligned with the gay and/or LGBTQ+ subcultures that were also finding power in speaking out. The American underground film movement was very much part of the rebellion against the control and rigidity of American politics and social idealisms, like the heterosexual, nuclear family, the goal of capitalistic productivity, consumerism, and more. The conversations that sparked this film movement were responding, like so many others, in rebellion to create works that highlighted different livelihoods than mainstream film and television presented.

In film, the conversation regarding the underground starts with Stan VanDerBeek, the first person to pinpoint the underground in a way that lines up with our current understandings of this category of filmworks. While Manny Farber may have actually been the first to use the term “underground” in connection to film, he was speaking about films within the Hollywood studio system and focused on directors of the 1940s-1950s, such as Howard Hawks and William

⁶ Suárez, Juan A. *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996., 53.

Wellman, claiming they were part of an underground thread in Hollywood of male directors who were “able to spring the leanest, shrewdest, sprightliest notes from material that looks like junk, and from a creative position that on the surface seems totally uncommitted and disinterested.”⁷ VanDerBeek, instead, focused outside of Hollywood, and gets us closer to the heart of the underground as we now know it. In “The Cinema Delimina:’ Films from the Underground,” VanDerBeek assembles a collection of images and quotes from other artists he considers to be underground (Stan Brakhage, Robert Breer, Len Lye, etc.). Interspersed throughout are manifesto-esque statements about the underground, in which he states, “The film is not a fad, it is not a product, it is not destined to decorate drive-in parking lots, it is not destined to put us to sleep but to wake us up. It is the language of the new art of our time, and it is an international language.”⁸ VanDerBeek doesn’t necessarily define the underground here, but this quote does get at some of the anti-consumerist aspects of the underground, the disruption it provides, and the ability for it to be international. Furthermore, many of the names are of directors and creators that do get labeled as experimental, avant-garde, and underground, interchangeably. P. Adams Sitney addressed this history in *Visionary Film*, noting that the term “experimental films” went out of fashion in favor of “underground” in the late 1950s, yet “Very few filmmakers were ever satisfied with any of these labels.”⁹ This may be part of the cause of the interchangeability of these terms, as Sitney also mentions avant-garde in this section. These terms do seem to be taken up and shed by filmmakers as time progressed, and while VanDerBeek focused on people like

⁷ Farber, Manny. 1957. "Underground Films." *Commentary* 24: 432.

⁸ VanDerBeek, Stan. "The Cinema Delimina: Films from the Underground." *Film Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1961), 12

⁹ Sitney, P. Adams. *Visionary Film: the American Avant-Garde 1943-2000*. 3rd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002., xii

Stan Brakhage, Robert Breer, Len Lye and others, it is important to investigate if they would retain the underground label, or if it would just be applied to some of their works.

However, over time, the discussion continued, and the underground began to take a more defined shape – that of an individually-driven film style. In Renan's *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*, he links some of the elements of the underground to the avant-garde creators of the 1920's and 1940's, but distinguishes the underground as a specifically contemporary form of filmmaking. The distinction is that by the time underground cinema became a category, filmmaking tools and materials were significantly more accessible and portable, and so the people making these personal films changed, including amateurs who didn't have access to formal filmmaking or artistic training. His working definition of the underground is "It is a film conceived and made essentially by one person and is a *personal statement* by that person. It is a film that dissents radically in form, or in technique, or in content, or perhaps in all three. It is usually made for very little money, frequently under a thousand dollars, and its exhibition is outside commercial film channels."¹⁰ This is where the sense of individualism becomes solidified into the conversation about the underground. Renan is focused on the personal aspects of the underground, and how the underground film can be a representation of that personal perspective. He also addresses the radical dissent, which can be read as countercultural, but it can also be read as anti-institutional, including institutions of art and aesthetics. These aspects of the underground are all very relevant and can be used to distinguish the underground from film traditions in the avant-garde and the experimental, even though there will always be overlaps and comingling between all three of these categories.

¹⁰ Renan, Sheldon. *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*. New York, NY: Dutton, 1967., 25

Beyond the definition of the underground, there has also been a pattern of delimiting a specific time and place for the underground film, and that is namely in NYC or LA, and generally during the years 1957 through the late sixties. Suárez notes that there is a sense of disagreement on the years between scholars; he argues it actually begins in 1961 and ends in 1966, but generally scholars do seem to agree that it began sometime during the late 1950s or early 1960s and was over before the 1970s.¹¹ Furthermore, one academic that has continuously regarded the underground in a regional framing is David E. James, namely his book, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*, which focuses on the LA avant-garde community which has overlaps with the underground community in that region, as well as his edited collection, *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*. Both of these texts take a localized scope on specific filmic communities, and *To Free the Cinema* takes an even more specified scope surrounding Jonas Mekas and the connections he made during the beginning era of the underground. James' geocinematic hermeneutic, or "the relationship between the way a city figures in a film and the way it figured in the filmmaking,"¹² is key in these texts and considers the city as a collaborator or character within the filmworks as well. This framing is beneficial in the sense that by remaining local, the specificities of the films made in that area during a particular era are able to shine forth.

However, there are some losses incurred by remaining locked to one space, one city, at a time. In James' work, it is easy to see why the localized scope is relevant and necessary, but at times, this framing can cut the conversation short. For example, in his text, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*, James writes:

¹¹ Suárez, Juan A. *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996., 55

¹² James, David E. *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005., 18

The period of the underground film can be reasonably dated from *Pull My Daisy* in 1959 to the run of *The Chelsea Girls* at the Cinema RendeZvous on West 57th Street, New York, in the summer of 1966 – the last and the most scandalous of a series of dramatic eruptions of the underground into the attention of the general public. That year, riots in Chicago, New York, and Watts and organized resistance to the war revealed the inadequacy of the social disengagement that has sustained underground film, while a year later *Wavelength* brought formal interests of a quite different order to bear upon the non-industrial use of the medium.¹³

Here, James is locating the underground primarily in NYC, and due to this framing, the timeline he presents is quite truncated – ending when the rebellious and countercultural ideas peddled by underground cinema became enveloped within the general public, or mainstream. It is important to note that he does say “reasonably dated,” and even within the same chapter, he does mention underground works that were made after this 1966 cut off, so it is not a harshly solidified timeline.

As previously mentioned, this truncated view of the underground is quite prevalent in the scholarship, wherein the underground ends at a certain point before the 1970s – but is this really the case? The boom may have been over, but surely some of the sentiments or attitude stuck around. Especially in this configuration, where James argues that these underground sentiments got brought into the mainstream – then wouldn’t those who were invested in the underground begin to respond in some shape or form to the co-opting of the underground film and the ideology that it attended? By creating this timeline and focusing the underground to a specific period and place, it does overlook the influence left upon many underground community members, especially queer underground members, that continued to make similarly themed works and branched off to different parts of the country, and in some cases, the world. Following this deflated boom, many filmmakers moved on from the coasts and NYC in particular as it

¹³ James, David E. *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989., 94

became less and less of a haven for these kinds of communities, but also it is feasible that many filmmakers' styles changed as the trends in avant-garde and experimental film changed. This makes it especially important to look at the afterlife of the boom – the queer underground in the following years and how it became dispersed across the country, seeding new communities beyond the coasts. In looking at the movements of some of these creators, a map begins to form wherein the queer underground exists outside of these localized hubs of the coastal cities, and mini-hubs begin to flourish and engage queer underground communities.

The Queer Underground: Specificities and Expansion

There is a strong argument to be made for the American Underground film to be considered as something that is inherently informed by queer sensibilities or “gay subculture,” as Suárez argues. He writes,

The confluence of gay readings of mass culture and decentered models of subjectivity in the underground cinema can be contextualized in relation to the historical situation of the gay community in the 1960s; more specifically, as a reaction against the mainstream press and the psychiatric establishment's contemporary attempts to fix and define homosexuality.¹⁴

This argument, alongside his focus on Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol and Jack Smith, creates a clear linkage between the queer experience of oppression during the 60s and the sexual transgressiveness that became a consistent theme within the larger underground. Furthermore, Jonas Mekas, in his *Movie Journal*, affirms these themes and focuses on queer sexualities:

A thing that may scare an average viewer is that this cinema is treading on the very edge of perversity. These artists are without inhibitions, sexual or any other kind. These are, as Ken Jacobs put it, “dirty- mouthed” films. They all contain homosexual and lesbian elements. The homosexuality, because of its existence outside the official moral conventions, has unleashed sensitivities and experiences which have been at the bottom of much great poetry since the beginning of humanity.¹⁵

¹⁴ Suárez, Juan A. *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996., 137

¹⁵ Mekas, Jonas. *Movie Journal, The Rise of the American Cinema: 1959-1971*. Edited by Gregory

Here, Mekas is relaying these sentiments in regard to Ron Rice's *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*, Jack Smith's *The Flaming Creatures*, and others which he calls "Baudelairean Cinema." Already, there is a distinction present, even in Mekas' attempt to distinguish different themes and practices within the larger underground film movement – namely a focus on LGBTQ+ themes. These works and themes absolutely can be considered within the larger umbrella of the American Underground, but might there be more distinctions to draw out that could allow for a more specific understanding of a queer underground cinema? Surely, taking on these "transgressive" themes and lesbian and gay experiences is one way to specify, but are there others?

Before addressing the specific characteristics of the queer underground film movement, first let's address the prefix "queer" here. While queer can and does reflect an element of sexuality within the film movement, as there were many LGBTQ+ filmmakers that populated the movement, the term reflects much more than individual sexuality in this discussion. As Siobhan B. Somerville notes in her definition of queer, "Because queer critique has the potential to destabilize the ground upon which any particular claim to identity can be made (though, importantly, not destroying or abandoning identity categories altogether), a significant body of queer scholarship has warned against anchoring the field primarily or exclusively to questions of sexuality."¹⁶ Queer reflects an attunement to disruption and destabilization, especially in terms of binaristic and essentialist lines of thought that have grounded many forms of study throughout academic histories. And while it oftentimes does tend to overlap with LGBTQ+ communities, goals, and sentimentalities, it cannot be tethered entirely to discussions of sexuality as queer

Smulewicz-Zucker. New York City, NY: Collier Books, 1972., 91-92

¹⁶ Burgett, Bruce, Glenn Hendler, and Siobhan B. Somerville. "Queer." Essay. In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, 1st ed., 187–91. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2007, (190).

theory works to disrupt so much more than just conceptions of sexuality. To draw from one of the LGBTQ+ zines, *Fanorama*, creator R.E.B. defines queer as follows: “Queer sets one apart from the mainstream. Queer questions and challenges the status quo. Queer asks if the heterosexual ‘norm’ is a role model we want to mimic. Queer is on the fringe. Queer is cutting edge. Queer is inclusive.”¹⁷ So, queer reflects more than sexual identity and speaks to a critical perspective towards the mainstream, towards norms and standards, and represents an active disruption of those societal guidelines. In this project, “queer” will reflect this sentiment of societally critical and disruptive, especially in arenas of “heterosexual ‘norms’” or heteronormativity, and “LGBTQ+” will reflect the community of sexually othered or marginalized folks represented by each letter (ie: lesbians, gay men, trans people, etc.).

Furthermore, a note is necessary about the use of “LGBTQ+” throughout this project. This is a later formation and term that has since come to reflect the collection of communities that do not adhere to conservative estimations of gender and/or sexuality. While it was not a popularized term in the times and periods I am discussing in this project, I found it an apt term to use, as it is representative of the same community, it is just an updated and more inclusive term. I made this choice because even though “LGBTQ+” was not a term of the time, it is used retroactively in a sense, in order to catch the relevant communities and members that this project is invested in. So often, the different lettered groups (lesbians, gays, bisexuals, etc.) are separated to study in piecemeal, but here, as I am discussing the communities, I wanted to include all potential members of said communities, even if they identified as something else, or utilized other terms – “LGBTQ+” works to umbrella the marginalized, overlapped, and overlooked peoples within the larger community.

¹⁷ REB. 1994. *Fanorama*, Issue #8. Providence, RI. Print.

Therefore, when I refer to members of the queer underground film movement, I am not referring to their sexuality, but instead their attitude towards the heteronormative and gender-normative status quo. For example, members like Ken and Flo Jacobs and Stan Brakhage that were firmly placed in the underground film movement also dabbled in the queer underground despite their heterosexuality. Ken Jacobs' *Blonde Cobra* (1963), featured Jack Smith and several queer themes, including Smith in drag and a number of monologues referencing necrophilia, childhood sexuality, and a mock performance of a nun confessing to lesbianism, also played by Smith. Here we can take this film as an example of how an LGBTQ+ sexuality was not a benchmark for queer underground film creation, and part of that may be due to some of the collaborative elements of the movement and this film in particular. *Blonde Cobra* was created by Jacobs using discarded scenes and materials from a project that Jack Smith and Bob Fleischer recorded together that Jacobs rearranged and edited together.¹⁸ This collaborative element of the queer underground film movement will be discussed in depth later, but for now it is important to clarify these distinctions between queer and LGBTQ+ before moving on to the characteristics of the movement.

To begin, I draw back to film criticism from the time, a key voice during the height of the underground in NYC was Parker Tyler, a gay film critic. His book, *Underground Film: A Critical History* is a collection of writings on the underground at the time, including many of the issues and strengths that he saw in the tradition. His writings can be especially helpful here, as there are clear moments when Tyler does not seem to be a fan of underground works, which we can use to begin to parse out some of the differences present in underground works. These distinctions, offered by Tyler, can act as perforations, allowing us to break off some of the

¹⁸ Dale, John. "Blonde Cobra ." 4:3. Accessed March 15, 2023.

specificities of what may be a queer underground. For example, in a particularly scathing reading of Warhol's work versus Brakhage, Tyler has this to say:

The phenomenon of Warhol was probably especially stinging to Brakhage, who had emerged from the old avant-garde tradition of technically acute and resourceful filmmaking. Warhol had, among other things, rolled back the history of film to certain artless, primitive beginnings (paradoxically artificial in effect) that would be obnoxious to anyone bred on the ingenuities of the historic avant-garde.¹⁹

Here, we see this stark comparison drawn, wherein Brakhage, having come out of a more technically rigorous tradition of the avant-garde, is upheld as this bastion of skill, and then Warhol and his amateurish style of filmmaking is considered "primitive" and "obnoxious." What is interesting here is that Brakhage and Warhol are both regularly cited as being figures of the underground across criticism and scholarship, but here we can start to pull the threads and see that there are some distinctions.

For Warhol, it can be easy to see how Tyler came to his conclusion, as on its surface, many of his films can seem a bit simple in terms of technical skill due to their lack of camera movement, color, and sound. Films like *Blow Job* (1964) and *Couch* (1964) may be read as primitive due to the fairly stagnant camera, propped on a tripod and set to record. *Blow Job*, in particular, sticks solely to the face of the man receiving the blow job, never moving to follow the action of the sexual act. *Couch*, on the other hand, included a great deal of sexually explicit content, as it was a series of reels of sexual activity and otherwise on and around the Factory couch between a variety of people, including Gerard Malanga, Allen Ginsberg, John Palmer, "Baby" Jane Holzer, Ivy Nicholson, Amy Taubin, Ondine, Jack Kerouac, Taylor Mead, Gloria Wood, Billy Linich, and many more.²⁰ In *Flesh Cinema*, Ara Osterweil considers *Couch* to be

¹⁹ Tyler, Parker. 1995. *Underground Film: A Critical History*. Boston, MA: De Capo Press, 26

²⁰ Osterweil, Ara. *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2014, 59.

one of the “inaugural films of the sexually explicit, queer Underground cinema of the flesh that flourished in the United States nearly ten years before the incursion of hard-core pornography into mainstream American film culture.”²¹ *Couch* included these sexually transgressive and queer themes, but also retained this “primitive” quality in that there wasn’t a kind of professional or pornographic focus on the sex acts, and much of the content wasn’t sexual at all. Osterweil notes that “Of the thirty-seven original rolls, only five actually contain instances of sexual penetration, and only a handful more contain instances of people stripping or kissing.”²² While *Blow Job* teased the audience by refraining from showing the actual sex act, *Couch* includes sex acts amidst the chaos of the Factory, with distractions and disruptions galore.

Both of these films stick closely to a single setting or frame, and do not incorporate any significant camera movement, elaborate editing, or the addition of sound. This can be considered what Susan Sontag called a “willful technical crudity,” wherein there is “a maddening indifference to every element of technique, a studied primitiveness.”²³ There is a rebelliously crafty or barebones aesthetic that on the surface mimics a lack of filmic skill, but unlike Tyler, I do not agree that this makes the works “artless,” or that it was done haphazardly. Instead, Warhol and other queer underground filmmakers were first and foremost, teaching themselves how to operate these cameras and how to edit, but also not shying away from showing this learning process to disrupt and push back against the notion of technical skill and aesthetic polish being benchmarks for artistic expression. Returning to Sontag, she argues that this mode of “technical crudity” in fact, “illustrates this snobbery about the coherence and technical finish of the work of art,” and that it is reflective of a contemporary American perspective wherein “neatness and

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Sontag, Susan. “A Feast for Open Eyes.” *The Nation*. April 13, 1964, 374.

carefulness of technique interfere with spontaneity, with truth, with immediacy.”²⁴ From this perspective, a polished, skillful film would represent a more restrained, planned, and unfeeling content, whereas this shamelessly amateur aesthetic that is present in the works of the queer underground film movement represent a much more authentic, spontaneous, and honest work. Warhol’s style may not be to Tyler’s technical standards, but Tyler’s ire may be representative of a divide wherein a queer underground would be unabashed in its lack of film skill, or in purposefully utilizing an aesthetic that leaves the impression of lack of skill. So then, it is this insistence of creating and sharing work without a polished finish, that speaks to the queer underground film movement. This characteristic will be termed as *Shamelessly Amateur Aesthetics/Filmmaking*.

Furthermore, when discussing works of folks like Mike Kuchar (namely *Sins of the Fleshapoids*) and Ron Rice’s *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*, Tyler has yet another distinction – “There is a more vulgar sort of Underground film which becomes a vehicle of a kind of opportunism, something less genuine than a personal exhibitionistic drive or the desire to articulate some frenzied, ingrown fantasy (like Jack Smith’s).”²⁵ Not only can we pick up on this vulgarity being another element of a more queer underground, but also we can see a fracturing occur between these ingenuine and vulgar underground films and the films of Jack Smith. In Mekas’s quote on the previous page, he is working to draw Rice and Smith together in this Baudelairean Cinema, but here Tyler is pulling them apart. How can we make sense of this? There is absolutely an element of personal taste taking part in Tyler’s criticisms, but in regard to vulgarity, Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* was not only brought up on obscenity charges, but also a

²⁴ Sontag, Susan. “A Feast for Open Eyes.” *The Nation*. April 13, 1964, 374-5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 48

1964 screening was raided by police.²⁶ This is not necessarily to argue its vulgarity as more so than Kuchar's or Rice's, but to say that vulgarity does seem to be an element of the queer underground specifically. However, it is a kind of surface vulgarity, wherein just the inclusion of nude bodies and queer sexual acts is what marks the content as vulgar by large portions of the population. The ensuing court case that followed Smith's screening in 1964 also brought forth a number of defenders, including Susan Sontag. Regarding the question of if the work is pornographic, which was integral to the obscenity charge, Sontag argues that the nude bodies and sexual acts are not done for sexual gratification, but instead, "Smith's images of sex are alternately childlike or witty, rather than sentimental or lustful."²⁷ While there are many images of genitalia, an orgy scene, and "vulgar" plays on commercialism with a faux lipstick commercial that asks the question, "Is there lipstick that doesn't come off when you suck cocks?," Sontag is right that they don't amount to a sexual climax the way porn does. Instead, it is playful with these queer and sexual themes, reveling in what the mainstream would consider vulgar. Here, we may pick out *LGBTQ+ Themes and Vulgarity* as an element that is shared with the larger underground, but perhaps Tyler's perceived meaninglessness or inauthentic elements of Kuchar, Rice and other queer underground filmmakers, is another thread to pull upon.

While Smith's *Flaming Creatures* highlights and celebrates queer culture and imagery with drag queens, utopian-esque orgies, and more, some of the queer underground film works take their content less seriously, or too seriously. To elaborate on this concept of "seriousness," or adversely, "unseriousness," first it is important to discuss the role of the avant-garde in the underground. These terms have frequently been entangled, and oftentimes filmmakers will

²⁶ Leland, John. 2015. "The Prosecution Resets in a 1964 Obscenity Case." *The New York Times* (NYC), November 1, 2015.

²⁷ Sontag, Susan. "A Feast for Open Eyes." *The Nation*. April 13, 1964, 374.

undertake one label only to refuse it and pick up another later. There is a definite overlap, but there are also important distinctions when discussing the queer underground film movement. Because so many of the underground filmmakers came out of and were inspired by earlier avant-garde movements, they often had more skill and a more serious demeanor towards their work and the art world. Drawing back to Tyler, part of the Brakhage vs. Warhol quote addresses this: “Brakhage...emerged from the old avant-garde tradition of technically acute and resourceful filmmaking.”²⁸ There is a sort of line drawn here, where some of the underground members were already technically-skilled and were invested in making their mark or including their input in the art world, and then the queer underground filmmakers tended to take themselves and their work less seriously. It is relevant, then, to recognize that the standards of the avant-garde seeped, at times, through to the underground. Avant-garde traditions created a kind of inlet for the underground to happen, and so often the boundaries between those terms are muddled as well, and so regarding the queer underground, it is also imperative to recognize that the filmmakers with this distinction were not only responding to mainstream Hollywood and popular conceptions of homosexuality, but they were also responding to the highfalutin, keenly technical traditions of the avant-garde.

What this resulted in was the amateur aesthetic, but also a sort of mockery, or a lighthearted approach to making underground films. An example of this is Kenneth Anger’s *Kustom Kar Kommando* (1965). This example is useful because it does have an extreme amount of technical and professional skill, as Anger had come through earlier avant-garde traditions and was a highly skilled filmmaker. However, the content of the video can speak to what I am calling *Unseriousness*, in that his work takes seriously what many do not – male hobbies and

²⁸ Tyler, Parker. 1995. *Underground Film: A Critical History*. Boston, MA: De Capo Press, 26

homoerotics, while also including a kind of tongue-in-cheek humor with the inclusion of the slow tempo “Dream Lover,” playing over top. *Unseriousness* can go two ways – it can present itself by rejecting the inherent seriousness that comes with being categorized as film art, and instead dive into lighthearted representations of serious content, which aligns with George Kuchar, but then it can also go an opposite route, taking too seriously content that many overlook. To explicate this concept of *unseriousness*, Sontag’s discussion of camp is relevant. In “Notes on Camp,” seriousness is a concept Sontag uses to ground some of the distinctions of camp, arguing “In naive, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails.”²⁹ Furthermore, Sontag says “The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely. Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.”³⁰ *Unseriousness*, like camp, then is about being playful, but does it fail at being serious? Is it equatable to “anti-serious”? While there are overlaps between what Sontag is arguing about camp, and with *unseriousness*, what I am drawing out here is a specific playfulness with concepts of seriousness and the shared ideas about what gets taken seriously versus what doesn’t. This aligns with Sontag’s line, “Camp involves a new, more complex relationship to ‘the serious,’” and so we might say that *unseriousness* is informed by camp, or even could be a facet of camp.³¹ The *unserious* work may, on the surface, look like it is rejecting or failing at seriousness, by way of an amateur aesthetic, content that isn’t usually taken seriously, or a playful and juvenile energy, but to reject seriousness, or to be anti-serious, means that there is nothing serious within the works. This is not the case, and in fact, *unseriousness* reflects an attention to and understanding

²⁹ Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays*. London etc., UK: Penguin Books, 2009, 283.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 288.

³¹ *Ibid.*

of seriousness in the sense that it plays on a shared awareness of what should be taken seriously and plays and disrupts those notions. To be clear, *unseriousness* does not reflect an actual lack of seriousness, as all these works require a level of dedication and follow-through, but more so a playfulness with the concept of seriousness, a rejection or retooling of what is considered worthy of artmaking and/or serious contemplation.

And so, *Kustom Kar Kommando* takes so seriously the aesthetics and imagery of cars and the love and care that can be poured into them. Anger aestheticizes and sexualizes something that is so every day and commonplace – vehicle care, and in that move, he created something beautiful, important, but also silly. While watching, the viewer cannot help but be mesmerized by the eye candy of sleek, polished vehicles, with “Dream Lover” and the smooth camera movements the feel reminiscent of a kind of caress. However, when the viewer steps away, the humor becomes more and more apparent, and the playful juxtaposition of the serenading music, the lush production value, and the content of car hobbies and male homoeroticism becomes worthy of discussion and analysis. *Unseriousness*, then, can provide a lighthearted, enjoyable viewing experience that lingers into deep thought, but usually due to content or aesthetics, it can easily mark some art works as unworthy or as less serious. This is a battle for a lot of the works of the queer underground film movement, as oftentimes the face-value of the content can be somewhat off-putting and hard to pin down in terms of meaning and message. The work can oftentimes feel like it is rejecting serious contemplation, but that does not mean there is no value or worth in taking the works seriously.

Finally, drawing on earlier and less generous comments from Jonas Mekas, we can solidify some of these characteristics of the queer underground. In David E. James’ *To Free the Cinema*, he recounts Mekas’ “attack” in the *Film Culture* magazine. James writes:

...an early issue contained Mekas's immediately notorious attack, "The Experimental Film in America," in which he lambasted the "adolescent character," a putative "conspiracy of homosexuality," the "lack of creative inspiration," and the "technical crudity and thematic narrowness" variously to be found in the work of young filmmakers including Stan Brakhage, Gregory Markopoulos, Curtis Harrington, and Kenneth Anger.³²

These criticisms launched at some of the incoming LGBTQ+ filmmakers and Stan Brakhage specifically addressed the juvenility, or playfulness, of their work, as well as the amateur technical stylings. While Mekas eventually changed his mind regarding these topics and filmmakers, these comments do make space for the queer underground to differentiate itself from the other, straight and more traditionally experimental underground filmmakers at the time. The "adolescent character" of Anger, Harrington, Markopolous and Brakhage can connect to an aspect of playfulness or *Unseriousness* within the queer underground, and these filmmakers paved the path for folks like the Kuchar brothers and eventually John Waters to create their tongue-in-cheek filmic playgrounds. Furthermore, the "conspiracy of homosexuality," is a criticism that begins to tether parts of the underground to a notion of queerness and a queer sensibility (*LGBTQ+ Themes and Vulgarities*), despite the inclusion of a straight man on Mekas' list. Lastly, the "technical crudity," reflects the lack of technical training, aesthetics, and know-how, which shows that these younger, incoming filmmakers were likely teaching themselves and working through their amateur skills (*Shamelessly Amateur Aesthetics/Filmmaking*). This critique from Mekas, while not long-lasting, did fracture the collection of underground filmmakers, which we can take to label a more specific subset of the queer underground film movement, including folks like Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, Ron Rice, Kenneth Anger, the Kuchar brothers, etc.

³² David E. James, *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 7-8.

A final element that I argue to be specifically connected to a queer underground is that of the surrounding *Community and Collaboration* that these underground traditions create and rely on. This is not to deny the personal-ness or individuality present in the singular works, as that is absolutely a significant characteristic of the underground, especially in the queer underground, as self-representation can be a political act in opposition to the problematic queer coding and queer representations available in the mainstream. In *Allegories of Cinema*, David E. James argues that there were two main pathways following the NYC underground film boom, one of which aligned more clearly with the avant-garde art world that included folks that were interested in investigating “the formal and material properties of film,” which led to the structuralist film movement of the 1960s.³³ The second fork, though, was more concerned with responding to “the increasingly urgent and volatile political situation of the late sixties,” and aligned itself with “more militant subcultures” in order to use film as a tool of “political contestation.”³⁴ James provides us with another clear area of distinction, wherein we can take this second fork, that aligned itself with a more social and political critique, as the queer underground filmmakers that continued making work in this well-worn tradition.

Furthermore, as the fork or subgroup that is invested in contesting social and political representations and treatment of their respective marginalized group(s), there is an inherent connection to *community and collaboration* here that reflects a specific interest in solidarity, shared sensibilities and building a stronger community. Another scholar addressed this connection as well, Janet Staiger, in *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* notes, “...underground refers to the association of minorities not just in resistance against the dominant

³³ James, David E. *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, 165.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 164-165.

but also in a common cause unified by a political agenda for change,” and “Thus, for New Yorkers in the early 1960s, the term underground had connotations not of the hidden but of alternative communities and political activism.”³⁵ Staiger addresses this element of community within the underground, and argues that the term reflected so much more than just a film movement, but it was always somewhat tethered to the political rebellion and activism of minority groups. In this formulation, the queer underground film movement is aligned with a larger, socially dissident community, that of the queer underground. This queer underground community is reflective of a primarily LGBTQ+ community (though there are heterosexual members), that is particularly resistant to the mainstream ideal, especially heteronormative and gender-norm ideals, and are highly playful with and critical of the status quo. The queer underground film movement, then, has distinct investment and ties to the larger queer underground community, and is instrumental in engaging and expanding the community.

Without a collaborative community, the queer underground may not have become what it is today. Take the Kuchar Brother’s early works during the NYC Queer underground – these works were highly collaborative, not only between brothers, but also between the cast and the creators, drawing ideas from high school friends, neighbors, and local characters. Furthermore, beyond the collaborative elements, there is also a nebulous aspect to the roles played, wherein George or Mike may stand in as an actor or may fill in for a role if someone doesn’t show – this practice continued when George began working collaboratively with other filmmakers, including Curt McDowell. This type of collaboration is also clear in the works of Warhol, as he relied on his revolving factory of folks to be the subjects of his pieces, oftentimes relying on them to improvise and thus take part in the creation of the film. Furthermore, the regular use of drag

³⁵ Staiger, Janet. *Perverse spectators: the practices of Film reception*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000, 135.

queens, and other members of the LGBTQ+ communities within so many of these queer underground films reflects a similar type of collaboration within the community – utilizing the artistry of queer performers to authentically highlight the queer community on a larger stage. Beyond the communities and collaboration that occurred within the queer underground, it is also key to look at the spaces in which queer underground communities came together. While this movement clearly began in NYC in the late 1950s or early 1960s depending on the scholar, it did not end there, even if the boom or focus on it ended.

These categorizing characteristics allow us to expand our understanding of the queer underground film movement and the community it relied on, but we can also expand the geographical scope of the movement. While part of the focus of the remainder of the project is to geographically map the growing network of queer underground respites across America following the boom period in the 1950s and 60s, first we can look towards a few examples from the time that expand the scope of the queer underground film movement beyond NYC. I will address two examples here that highlight how the queer underground film movement was always taking up space outside of the coastal urban hubs of New York City and San Francisco. The first example is that of Stan VanDerBeek's *Movie-Drome* at the Gate Hill Co-op, which is situated in my hometown of Stony Point, NY. While the area is currently considered suburban and a NYC commuter respite, in the 1960s, the area was quite rural and heavily forested. The land had been purchased in 1954 by Paul and Vera Williams, two members of the Black Mountain College in North Carolina, with the intention of creating "an intentional community within the visual arts" that would be run as a cooperative. The land was situated on Gate Hill Road, and thus Gate Hill Artists' Cooperative was named. A variety of creators lived at the co-op, including "literary scholar M. C. Richards and composer David Tudor, potters Karen Karnes and David Weinrib

and composer John Cage.”³⁶ The cooperative wasn’t film-focused, but it became a landing point for VanDerBeek and his “dome-studio-laboratory-theatre” *Movie-Drome*, which was a short, domed building, only accessible through the bottom, in which VanDerBeek projected his films while audience members lay flat on the floor.³⁷ What is relevant here is that VanDerBeek, one of the early adopters of the term “underground,” not only left the city to create this prototype, but he also ushered many members of the underground film community to come out and visit. In 1966, VanDerBeek hand-drew a map with directions to get to the *Movie-Drome* and circulated it amongst interested parties at the Fourth New York Film Festival. Gloria Sutton writes about the community draw the event had in her book *The Experience Machine: Stan VanDerBeek’s Movie-Drome and Expanded Cinema*;

In addition to his fellow New York Film Festival participants and other esteemed experimental filmmakers, including Shirley Clarke, Ed Emshwiller, and Agnès Varda, the draw for stalwart scholars including Annette Michelson and celebrities such as Andy Warhol to board a chartered bus for a thirty-five-mile trip was to experience what Geldzahler described as the “unveiling” of VanDerBeek’s recently constructed prototype for his *Movie-Drome*.³⁸

This unveiling ushered many film folks outside of the city and since it was a chartered bus, it also made stops to a few places of interest outside of New York City, including Robert Breer’s studio in Palisades, NJ, and the shared home of USCO, or Us Company, another art collective located close by in Garnerville, NY.³⁹ Furthermore, in later years, the Gate Hill Cooperative would also see visitors such as Yoko Ono and John Lennon, as well as Jasper Johns who also

³⁶ Sutton, Gloria. “Communitas ... After Black Mountain College.” Web log. *Bauhaus Imaginista* (blog). Bauhaus imaginista Journal. Accessed February 15, 2023.

³⁷ Sutton, Gloria. *The Experience Machine: Stan VanDerBeek’s Movie-Drome and Expanded Cinema*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015, 29.

³⁸ Sutton, Gloria. *The Experience Machine : Stan VanDerBeek’s Movie-Drome and Expanded Cinema*. Leonardo Book Series. The MIT Press, 2015, 19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

lived in Stony Point.⁴⁰ While many of these names are not necessarily aligned with the queer underground film movement, many are close and tangential. The *Movie-Drome* and the willingness of folks to travel to it, shows that the queer underground film movement always had legs and the ability to take on a variety of spaces beyond the urban. The community of artists were already dispersing outwards and found reasons to come together when new creations were ready to be seen.

Another example of the expanded geographical scope of the movement is a small one, but not inconsequential. In Renan's *Introduction to the American Underground Film*, he discusses how the underground film movement began to get more publicity due to a few key folks who were writing about and screening films to a larger public. One, of course, is Jonas Mekas, but a somewhat surprising inclusion may be George Manupelli who was working out of Ann Arbor, Michigan.⁴¹ Manupelli was not only a filmmaker, but he also was Associate Professor of Art at the University of Michigan's School of Art from 1962-1972, and he created the Ann Arbor Film Festival in 1963. The Ann Arbor Film Festival (AAFF) is largely considered one of the longest running independent and/or experimental film festivals in North America, and it gained traction quickly in the 1960s. Now, while AAFF didn't institutionalize their "Out Night" programming, which is a "celebration of LGBTQ experimental films," until the early 2000s, the film festival has had a long history of including queer underground filmmakers.⁴² In AAFF's second year, film critic Pauline Kael served as a judge and Kenneth Anger screened

⁴⁰ Brum, Robert. "Rockland: Legend of 'The Land' Lives on after More than Six Decades." *LoHud*. November 30, 2020.

⁴¹ Renan, Sheldon. *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*. New York, NY: Dutton, 1967., 102.

⁴² Pertuso, Katherine. "Q&A with out Night Programmer: Sean Donovan." aaff, October 29, 2020. <https://www.aafilmfest.org/single-post/q-a-with-out-night-curator-sean-donovan>.

Scorpio Rising, and by 1966 it had drawn in the likes of Andy Warhol and Yoko Ono, who screened a few of her films.⁴³

In parsing through the archive of film programs available digitally from the Ann Arbor District Library, a few members of the queer underground show up time and time again. Anger, as already mentioned attended in 1966, but he also attended in 1970 and screened *Invocation of my Demon Brother*.⁴⁴ Other names, like Stan VanDerBeek, Curt McDowell, Robert Nelson, Bruce Baillie, Bob Cowan, and more show up throughout the early decades of the film festival, and there are many names that are quite unknown with very little public information available. What this tells us is that AAFF made room for filmmakers that were virtually unknown and gave them a stage to share their work that may have been more accessible than traveling to NYC. Furthermore, AAFF also offered prizes each year, oftentimes sponsored by other film groups or communities, like Ann Arbor Film Cooperative, Cinema Guild, and then some local sponsorships, like Del Rio Bar.⁴⁵ Another way AAFF was important and helpful to queer underground creators is included in some of the early programs; the AAFF screenings could lead to a much larger audience. The notice reads: “In addition, Mike Getz of UNDERGROUND CINEMA-12 customarily attends the Festival and selects films for presentation at leading theatres throughout the country. Last year 8 different programs of films were screened at about 17 theatres. Participating filmmakers shared nearly \$12,000.00 in fees. A similar arrangement is expected this year.”⁴⁶ Here, there is not only an option to share queer underground work beyond the coastal, urban centers of NYC and SF, but the reach could go beyond Ann Arbor, if chosen by Mike Getz. It is film festivals and programs like these that helped spread queer underground

⁴³ McKee, Jenn. “Ann Arbor Film Festival: A 50-Year Timeline.” AnnArbor.com, March 24, 2012.

⁴⁴ “8th Ann Arbor Film Festival Program.” Ann Arbor, MI, n.d. Accessed May 26, 2023.

⁴⁵ “11th Ann Arbor Film Festival Program.” Ann Arbor, MI, n.d. Accessed May 26, 2023.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

film across the country, and created events where queer underground filmmakers, community members, and audiences, could find their peers.

Part of what made Manupelli so successful in this venture at the time was that he already had a network of likeminded and passionate creators, which included the Once Group, which was another collective of artists set in Ann Arbor that forayed into film when Manupelli joined. Current AAFF chair, Leslie Raymond noted, “Things were things happening on East Coast and the West Coast, and I think he saw an opportunity to do something in the Midwest. And he was connected to people. They came to Ann Arbor by knowing George, and ... (AAFF) was emerging from this time of cultural and social upheaval.”⁴⁷ Members of the underground film movement were drawn into the Midwest via events like AAFF, and it just took one point of connection with Manupelli in order for Ann Arbor to be a viable destination. The creation and success of AAFF essentially made Ann Arbor a significant plot point in the map of the queer underground film community, and it remained a key destination as George Kuchar attended and screened films there in 1985 and 1992.⁴⁸ These two examples, the *Movie-Drome* and the creation of AAFF, both show that the queer underground film movement was never stagnated in the coastal, urban hubs, and that the sentiments of the movement were igniting in spaces across the country, rural or otherwise. Then, sentiments of this queer underground spawned outwards as folks read about these works, like John Waters reading about the underground film screenings of the 60s in his Baltimore bedroom which encouraged him to travel to NYC and see them himself, but also through the migration of many of these queer underground filmmakers.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Qtd. in McKee, Jenn. “A Remembrance of Artist, U-M Prof and Ann Arbor Film Festival Founder George Manupelli.” mlive, September 19, 2014.

⁴⁸ Mitchell, Harmen. “Kuchar's 'The Xtras' Highlight of Weekend Avant-Garde Film Slate.” *Ann Arbor News*, September 20, 1985; “Hold Me While I'm Naked.” *50th Ann Arbor Film Festival Program*, March 27, 2012., 90

⁴⁹ Stevenson, Jack. *Desperate Visions: The Films of John Waters & the Kuchar Brothers*. London: Creation Books, 1996., 72

Now that I have explored the beginnings of the queer underground film movement, defined and categorized specific characteristics of the movement, and highlighted how it was never completely tethered to urban space of NYC, let's revisit the relevant distinctions of the queer underground film movement. I have drawn out a number of themes and styles that may not be aligned with the larger underground distinction, like that of a *shamelessly amateur aesthetics/filmmaking*, as well as a juvenile playfulness, or *unseriousness*, with what tends to be *LGBTQ+ themes and vulgar* topics and images. These elements seem to create a fissure in the underground film criticism at the time, and they fall under the purview of many of the queer filmmakers of the time. There are absolutely heterosexual filmmakers that seemed to dabble a bit in these elements as well, dipping a toe in to investigate these themes in their styles, but primarily this fissure tends to put LGBTQ+ filmmakers on one side. When there is a muddling here, it tends to be due to the aesthetic of technical skill present in the work, which has lent itself to a privileging of folks like Kenneth Anger, who is regularly listed as an underground filmmaker. This is, in part, my reasoning for pressing on this tear, because when we leave the underground whole, what happens is that folks like the Kuchar brothers, Rice and others tend to be overlooked because they lack that presentation of technical skill and self-seriousness.

While I believe that many alternative, avant-garde, and/or experimental filmmakers at this time were playing in the queer underground film style, it can be difficult to definitively list a set of names that is representative of the American queer underground film movement. This is partly because of the temporary dabbling some folks did, but it is also because of the long shadow of inspiration that this movement created, wherein filmmakers in the decades following may adhere to the characteristics of the queer underground and their work may be representative of the driving sentiments of the movement. During the height of the queer underground in NYC,

there are some people we can solidly put in the queer underground film bracket, even if all of their works don't adhere to the four characteristics I have presented, their oeuvres reflect an investment in the queer underground. The Kuchar brothers both fall into the category, as well as Ron Rice, Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol, Curtis Harrington, Jack Smith, etc. Then, a kind of second wave would include folks like John Waters (his early, non-mainstream films), Barbara Hammer, Bruce La Bruce (who was also a significant LGBTQ+ zinester), Sadie Benning (particularly their PixelVision works), Curt McDowell, and others who had been inspired by works created in the initial underground film movement and went on to make their own in later years. George Kuchar works well as a focus for this project because his career spans multiple decades across a number of queer underground communities, and while his work changes, it still retains the four characteristics I have laid out. His work during the height of the NYC movement were fictional narratives, created from scratch with some influence from the melodramas he and Mike would watch in the movie theaters. His work after the handheld video camera became accessible in the mid 1980s, changed to include a large number of video diaries that were nonfictional and starred Kuchar as himself. Now, it would be easy to claim here that one era of his work is particularly attuned to the characteristics of the queer underground film movement, but the truth of it is that the narrative type of films he made in his early career never went away. They were always still being made, he just relegated that to the classroom, as it always ensured a cast and crew, whereas the video diaries only required one person to be the director, the star and the editor all at the same time. So, while his work may have gotten more varied as he grew his community, his skillsets, and got older, the video diaries and the class films both still retain the ethos and characteristics of the queer underground film movement.

Of course, as time went on, the characteristics of the queer underground film movement evolved to respond to the ever-changing landscape of culture, politics and society, especially the treatment of LGBTQ+ communities, and the censorship of queer art on mainstream platforms. These four characteristics can remain the same, but the way they presented in the works changed, as it felt like the voices, experiences, and messages of queer underground communities were being repressed and ignored. In particular, the shamelessly amateur aesthetics and filmmaking seemed to become more apparent, or increased in shamelessness, in part as a rebellion against standards for art, which were being discussed in depth with the NEA debates and obscenity charges on queer art works. The LGBTQ+ themes and vulgarity became less about celebrating queer love and otherness, and a bit more about shocking and disrupting popular conceptions of propriety surrounding ideas of nudity, sexuality, and especially LGBTQ+ sexualities. In Kuchar's work, for example, the use and focus on his body fluids feels like a vulgarity that is rejecting and working to break down the messages of danger surrounding gay men's bodies in the AIDS crisis. Furthermore, with unseriousness, the tongue-in-cheek critiques became more present and pointed towards the government, but also worked to add in some levity in order to pull queer underground community members up with laughter and critique. And of course, community and collaboration became even more necessary, as so much information was being withheld about the AIDS epidemic, about sexual safety, and about how to keep oneself generally safe, that the queer underground community needed to provide for each other instead of relying on the American government. Community brought power in numbers, and that continued to grow in importance as the queer underground community, and larger LGBTQ+ community, realized how solidarity was their strongest weapon. Over time, the queer underground community and film movement, shifted based on the surrounding political and historical contexts

that it was responding to, which can make it slightly difficult to track. But these changes force us to take our time and note the ebbs and flows of the sentiments that fed the movement and community.

In drawing out these specificities of the queer underground, I am hopeful that the queer underground filmmakers who may be overlooked or disregarded for their amateur styles and lighthearted play with vulgar topics will instead be given room to be taken up with serious attention paid to the nuances and rebellious elements present. Furthermore, the importance of *community and collaboration* in the queer underground is something that I want to address further – first by creating a map of the queer underground utilizing both George Kuchar’s travels and the crossflow of queer zines following the initial boom of the 1960s. The zines provide significant insight into the larger queer underground communities and show how these four characteristics were integrated and shared across the country amongst like-minded, rebellious, queer folks. Kuchar acts as a key interlocutor to a network of queer underground members and havens across the country, and his positionality and film and video works makes him an exemplary figure to track the longer life and afterlife of the queer underground film movement.

Why George Kuchar: Background

In the realm of underground film and video, George Kuchar is primarily discussed in connection with his twin brother, Mike, and their trash-spectacular narratives that injected the queer underground movement in the 1960s with a taste of the bizarre. These collaborative films have long overshadowed the individual work that both George and Mike made since ceasing to work together in the late 1960’s. Since their amicable split, George not only left their Bronx homestead to teach at the San Francisco Art Institute until his death in 2011, but also made a significant switch from 16mm film to video in 1985. By switching to this more affordable and

accessible format, George embarked on what would become a vast body of diaristic videos, which will be the primary focus of this project. Within academic scholarship, George Kuchar's work, particularly his video work, is largely underrepresented. Outside of a few exemplary articles and chapters from the likes of Gene Youngblood, Scott MacDonald, and Juan A. Suárez, Kuchar is generally mentioned briefly among the names connected to the underground cinema movement of the 1960's, if he is not ignored outright. There are several reasons for the lack of scholarship on Kuchar, specifically his video diaries. Chief among them is their lack of seriousness. Kuchar's videos are regularly met with laughter, and regarding classification, these diaristic video works operate on the margins of the avant-garde, resisting easy alignment with the work of some of his contemporaries.

Part of the goal of this project is to reclaim George Kuchar and his works as deeply relevant to understanding the queer underground film movement. Unlike many filmmakers that dabble in different styles and practices over their lives, Kuchar's films and videos retain most if not all the characteristics of the queer underground throughout the decades he was productive. While his work can be organized into smaller subsections (his classroom films, his collaborative films with Mike, his alien abduction films, his travelogues, etc.), all of them contain the characteristics of the queer underground film movement that he came up in and can be representative of the movement. In 1997, John Waters wrote the introduction to George and Mike's book, *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*, and he wrote:

The real hey-day of "underground movies" didn't last long in the '60s but the Kuchar brothers have managed to survive with their sense of humor and original style intact. They didn't want to cross over. They still make funny, sexy, insanely optimistic films and videos every day of their lives and nobody tells them what to do or how to make it more "commercial." The Kuchars may be the only real underground filmmakers left working in America today.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ George Kuchar and Mike Kuchar, *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool* (Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997), iii.

The refusal to “cross over,” as Waters calls it, is part of the reason George Kuchar is such a valuable resource for this project. As one of the “only real underground filmmakers left working in America,” in 1997, and presumably up until his death in 2011, Kuchar is representative of the resilience of the queer underground film movement. With his travels across the country to screen his works and visit his peers in filmmaking and from his classroom, Kuchar not only provides us with a figure steeped in the queer underground, but he also can provide a very clear pathway and trajectory for how the queer underground film movement found respite, work, and community following the boom in NYC. He remained very active in the community throughout his life, and through his role as an educator that spanned almost forty years, he ushered in many new community members by teaching them his style of filmmaking.

Kuchar, then, was someone that not only stuck with the queer underground, but he also spread the characteristics and skills and style of the movement to an uncountable number of students through the years, as well as audience members who attended any of his screenings. He offers a specifically community-oriented image of the queer underground film movement, from his early filmmaking days, making use of his Bronx neighbors to act in his films, to his teaching and traveling days, being invited to teach and screen films at colleges across the country, and his position as an educator, memorializing the queer underground in his students and his studio. Finally, he also was one of the more productive surviving members of the queer underground film movement. Unfortunately, many of the other key members, like Ron Rice, Gregory Markopolous, Andy Warhol, and Jack Smith, died or stopped creating film works fairly soon after the queer underground film movement boom ended. And while his brother, Mike Kuchar, has also created film works throughout his life, he has been a bit more varied in his work – spending a lot of time building up and exhibiting his erotic art drawings, working with German

director, Rosa von Praunheim, etc. He also is significantly less productive in terms of number of film works compared to George, and hasn't written as prolifically – even in their shared book, *Reflection from a Cinematic Cesspool*, only around 50 of the pages were written by Mike, while almost 125 pages were written by George. Finally, the specifically diaristic tone of much of George's work in the latter half of his life, provide much more insight into the goings-on of the queer underground film movement and the community that formed around it. Due to this tone, I analyze the films not only as film works, but also as historical records of the community network that spawned the country from the mid-1970s to the early 2000s. George Kuchar offers a large body of work that spans the beginning of the queer underground film movement in the 1950s through the end of his life in 2011. His work, his pedagogy, and his travels offer an expansive representation of the queer underground film movement and how it migrated and persevered in the decades following its initial success in NYC.

Processes of Analysis: Methods

This project came out of a desire to distinguish the currents from a queer underground and to explore George Kuchar, his life following the NYC underground, and his video works more deeply. In the process, a number of pertinent overlaps and investigations arose, including the LGBTQ+ zines, the queer underground community, the important role of academic institutions, and the geographical mapping of the queer underground film movement. To explain my methods of analysis, it will be helpful to trace the pathway of the project, to elaborate upon what I was looking for and the decisions I made along the way. Much like any project, this one begun when I first had the opportunity to see a few of Kuchar's video works, including *Weather Diary 3* and *Weather Diary 6*. The disgust present in these works reeled me in instead of the

expected rejection reaction, much like I argue in Chapter 1, with its alluring and lighthearted play with gross and disgusting aesthetics.

To unravel and understand this reaction, I began my analysis by seeking out more of Kuchar's videos to watch, as well as digging into aesthetic theory to understand how disgust could ever fascinate, and utilized queer theory to explore how this fascination response may have worked on queer underground communities. At this point, it was necessary to investigate the larger community beyond Kuchar and filmmakers, which led me to the LGBTQ+ zines, and utilizing them as media history to explore the sentiments and ideals of the queer underground community that informed the film movement. These LGBTQ+ zines offer much more insight into the community that formed around queer and queer underground ideals and allowed me to draw connections between the aesthetics in Kuchar's work and the aesthetics and attitudes of the encompassing community. This enabled me to make arguments beyond just Kuchar's work, and the film works from the queer underground movement, and to show how a queer disgust aesthetic operates more broadly amongst LGBTQ+ communities that reject mainstream norms. Furthermore, in studying these zines, it became clear that many of the sentiments of the queer underground film movement that I had seen in Kuchar and other filmmakers' work had been enveloped within the larger queer underground community and had been spread throughout time and geographical space, as the zines were sources from multiple states and spanned multiple years through the 1990s.

First, this overlap of sentiments led me to the question, "what exactly distinguishes the queer underground film movement?" When speaking about Kuchar with peers and professors, I noticed several terms used to describe his work, including "underground," "experimental," "avant-garde," "queer underground," etc. Next, I turned to the academic scholarship, and folks

like Gene Youngblood and David E. James categorize Kuchar firmly in the underground tradition.⁵¹ But then what of this prefix, “queer”? Was this an actual distinction, or was it just a colloquial specification to mark certain filmmakers as LGBTQ+? To answer these questions, I returned to several films and filmmakers from the movement, as well as film criticism to parse out distinctions between the overarching underground and the queer underground film movement. In this process of investigation, my second query started to gain more traction, and that query was “When and where did the queer underground film movement end?” In my research, I had already seen how the characteristics of the queer underground film movement were being undertaken, incorporated, and disseminated by way of the LGBTQ+ zines to the surrounding queer underground community, as well as how the sentiments of the queer underground film movement had spread outwards beyond the movement’s center of NYC and the timeline suggested by scholars – the late-1950s or early-1960s. How could I contend with this somewhat rigid scope offered by scholars, and the long career of George Kuchar and the spread of queer underground sentiments through LGBTQ+ zines for decades to follow?

While I had a hypothesis that the movement didn’t really end, or that its boom period created reverberations that traveled outwards through time or space, it was necessary to find a way to track these reverberations and the repository spaces that the queer underground created. Since I had already noticed the expansiveness of the LGBTQ+ zines, I began to place pinpoints on a map to trace where the zines were coming from to show that the sentiments of the queer underground film movement had spread throughout the country in the decades following the initial boom. While doing this research, I realized I could also map Kuchar in a similar way, as many of his videos took on a kind of travelogue genre, wherein he would recount his travels with

⁵¹ James, David E. *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, 140; and Youngblood, Gene. *Underground Man*. Chicago, IL: Video Data Bank, 2006.

film clips, pictures, drawings, and more. These videos provided a geography of Kuchar's travels and visits across the country, and so I revisited his videos and took note when he mentioned a new place or city he was visiting.

Here, I was drawing from a history of film scholarship that geographically framed film movements. Many of the studies on underground film are more invested in tracing the histories of and transitions between art movements, as scholars like P. Adams Sitney and Sheldon Renan did. However, I was more invested in a geographical approach to underground cinema, in part to carve out the community and spread of a specifically queer underground film movement. Much like the work of David E. James in *The Most Typical Avant-Garde* and the work Michael Zryd did in mapping film programs in Canada, I wanted to trace out the geography of the queer underground film movement beyond the initial hub in NYC. By tracing the geography rather than the preceding and following art movements, I was much more able to foreground questions of space and place, which presented a disruption in the coastal and urban framing that has limited the discussions of the movement up until now. And so, like the LGBTQ+ zines, I placed pinpoints on a map that correlated with the travels from his videos and, if possible, took note of why Kuchar was traveling to that city or region. This method of using film and film history to answer questions of geography and migration of ideas opens the scope of the queer underground film movement beyond one or two cities and a handful of years to a much more expansive and long-lasting image of the movement. It also shows how film works can be read and analyzed for more than just their content and visual aesthetics; they can be utilized as historical records of migrations, events, and relationships. Furthermore, this geographical mapping between the films and the zines presents a more nuanced and trackable representation of how film movements can inform and create communities. This intervention not only disrupts much of the coastal and

urban focus that has been traditionally applied to the underground film movement, as well as queer communities, but it also resituated geography as an integral element in understanding the networks created by film movements.

These maps not only showed the expansiveness of the queer underground film movement and the spread of its characteristics, but it also uncovered the final important overlap – that of the queer underground and academic institutions. While Kuchar being an educator was always on my radar, it took plotting the maps and seeing how often he visited other universities, and how the LGBTQ+ zines also took on a similar pattern, to recognize how integral academic institutions became to the resilience of the queer underground. As scholar Michael Zryd notes:

Although New York was the center of avant-garde film activity in the 1960s (only the vibrant scene in San Francisco was comparable), numerous other centers emerged in the 1970s, usually following film festivals and the establishment of media centers (partially supported by newly available NEA and state government arts funding) and university programs.⁵²

These university programs became one of the new sources for the spread of avant-garde, or more specifically, queer underground film movements. Studio Kuchar at San Francisco Art Institute, then, became even more relevant to these mounting queries about the spread of the queer underground film movement's characteristics and the formation of communities around the movement. Considering that many queer underground filmmakers had found positions in academic institutions, Kuchar was once again useful in representing that larger pattern. Utilizing his course materials, student evaluations, and some of the films created in Studio Kuchar, I was able to investigate the classroom as a site for understanding the queer underground film movement and how its characteristics spread through pedagogy, collaborative class work, and academic communities. The methods of analysis here allow us to understand the role of

⁵² Zryd, Michael. 2006. "The Academy and the Avant-Garde: A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance." *Cinema Journal* 45 (2): 31.

academic institutions more deeply and how they can help in memorializing and persevering elements of a film movement through education and studio courses that allow students to try their hand at different filmmaking traditions and styles.

While my focus is on Kuchar teaching in the 1980s through the early 2000s, I also wanted to address the changing academic system and to trouble this “relationship of dependence and resistance,” that Zryd discusses. I touch on this in the conclusion, but it is important to investigate this relationship, especially as academic institutions continue to operate more and more like businesses rather than public resources for education, and so is it the best repository for queer underground film, for avant-garde film? My position in regards to critical university studies is a troubled one, as I have thus far experienced the university primarily as a student who wouldn’t have access to queer underground content without the opportunities provided to me by way of academic scholarships, jobs, and more. However, in my time as an academic, I have found myself aligning with many of the critiques of the university system that point out how the privatization of public universities has meant increasing costs for students, lowered academic standards, a hyper-attentiveness to student retention, and more. One key text that has informed my political stance on this subject is Christopher Newfield’s *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*.⁵³ While I deeply believe that higher education should be a possibility for anyone that wants to educate themselves, by aligning with a neoliberal, market-driven mindset, the academic institution has begun to eat its own tail so to speak, and prioritizes student retention (and thus money) above any kind of academic standard to the point that oftentimes my peers and I question if students are getting their money’s worth, and more importantly, if they are actually getting the depth of training that should be representative

⁵³ Newfield, Christopher. *The Great Mistake: How we wrecked public universities and how we can fix them*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018.

of a college degree. It is a difficult discussion to have without falling back on what sound like conservative talking points of essentialist, black-and-white standards, but we must hold multiple truths at once here and recognize the importance of having a baseline of outcomes that students should meet before graduating while also recognizing the immense financial burden that students are left with, especially if they fail and must retake multiple courses. As educators, how do we navigate that and also still push the university to remain accessible – especially when it comes to screenings and events that should serve the public just as much as it serves paying students? Academic systems and the companies and corporations that cater to them are rising costs and through that, gatekeeping, much of the content that made this dissertation project possible, along with so much more. This is not the same academic system that first became the obvious and safe repository for queer underground and/or avant-garde film, and so there must be a redoubled effort to make these films and materials accessible and available for people and communities outside of the academic system.

In researching this project, my methods of analysis tended to arise quite organically as I investigated new threads and frictions that became present. Many of these methods fall in line with the practices of film scholarship, namely film analysis, utilizing film criticism from the period, and the incorporation of theory to make meaning – particularly queer theory here. However, the use of LGBTQ+ zines as media history to shore up the discussion of the creation of community around the queer underground film movement, and to highlight the spread of the movement's characteristics is new in the sense that they are being used as geographical points on a map as well as for their content. Furthermore, the geographical tracking and using Kuchar's videos to inform this tracking, is also a new approach to understanding the spread of a film movement. This kind of tracing could be done with other film movements as well, especially as

we move further into the digital age, as it is easier to track where and when films were made. The geographical focus allows us to understand the queer underground and Kuchar much more expansively as a continuous migration of creators and ideas to a litany of regional hubs that popped up following the boom of the queer underground film movement. In utilizing these methods, I was able to pinpoint outposts of the queer underground film movement, how the sentiments of the movement were integrated into the queer underground community, how they spread, and how queer underground film was undertaken in academic spaces.

Chapter Summaries

For the remainder of the project, the four chapters will explore and expand upon the queer underground film movement, its aesthetics and how the characteristics and spirit of the movement spread throughout time, space and invested communities. To begin, “Reading for Filth: A Queer Disgust Aesthetic,” is invested in defining and labeling a queer disgust aesthetic that engenders community building among queer underground members. This chapter relies on a history of disgust in aesthetics to display how disgust can both shock and fascinate, wherein the shock facet works to keep traditional and normative folks at bay, and the fascinate facet eagerly welcomes in others, who are more invested in non-mainstream queer content and communities. Drawing from queer theory conversations of camp, antisocial and relational theses, this chapter makes the argument that a queer disgust aesthetic can help draw people together, namely queer underground communities that have an investment in rejecting norms and the status quo in favor of a more disruptive and authentic representation of larger LGBTQ+ communities. “Reading For Filth” offers, then, one significant way in which queer underground communities found each other, by way of a specifically marked aesthetic that would ideally ward off more mainstream audience members and usher in engaged, queer underground community members.

Now that a potential pathway for community members to find each other has been discussed, the following two chapters focus on the shockwaves of the queer underground film movement and how the characteristics of the movement infiltrated the rest of the United States throughout the following decades. Chapter 2, “Expanding the Queer American Underground: Reverberations with George Kuchar,” shows the expansivity of the queer underground film movement by highlighting the travels of Kuchar throughout the decades following the initial boom in NYC. While the film movement’s initial boom ended in NYC in the late 1960s, the sentiments of the movement had a long and various trajectory that spanned a great deal of the U.S., and the following decades, which becomes clear in tracking Kuchar’s movements through his video works. While much focus has been placed on coastal and urban centers in many of the discussions of the queer underground film movement and queer communities’ writ large, this chapter utilizes queer theory and studies, as well as tracking Kuchar’s travels, to show that there have always been queer communities throughout the United States, residing in urban, rural, coastal and inland spaces, as well as a number of safe and welcoming respites for queer underground film and filmmakers. Furthermore, this chapter is not only invested in beginning this tracking work, but it also hones in on the types of community Kuchar created within the queer underground film movement, including his early days in the Bronx, making films with his friends, then his entry and inclusion within the larger NYC underground film movement, and finally his pedagogical community built up during his time teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute. The goal of this chapter, then, is to not only draw out the importance of community within the larger queer underground film movement, but to also show the afterlife of the movement and how many of the filmmakers, characteristics and energy of the queer underground ricocheted throughout the United States for decades following.

Chapter 3 continues to expand the scope of the queer underground, with a specific focus on LGBTQ+ zines from the 1980s and 1990s to understand the encompassing queer underground community and how it spread the sentiments of the film movement across stateliness for decades. “Messages of Queer Underground Rebellion: LGBTQ+ Zines in America” is invested in showing how the four characteristics of the queer underground film movement were taken up within the larger queer underground community. Taking up zines as a site of analysis, this chapter draws upon the argument from Chapter 2, and shows how expansive the spread of ideas and sentiments from the queer underground film movement were and how they reverberated over time and space by way of the postal service and invested queer underground creators. Here, I utilized a number of LGBTQ+ zines from the Michigan State University Special Collections, from the Queer Zine Archive Project, and from particular zines like *Queer Zine Explosion* to create another map wherein the flow of zines can represent a flow of ideas and the spread of queer underground sentiments across the country. The map also serves a dual purpose in showing the breadth of the queer underground community and how these conversations were happening across the country, in small midwestern towns to huge urban centers, and how communities were created through these zines and the conversations they sparked. My analysis in this chapter focused not only on how the LGBTQ+ zines undertook the characteristics of the queer underground film movement, but also how the spread of these characteristics and the communities that formed in the aftermath became safe havens and beacons for wayward queer travelers. Overlooking these outposts of the queer underground not only pares down its importance, but it also ignores the way that smaller communities crop up in unexpected places, as well as the ways queer underground community members create systems of safe travel and tourism by way of communicating with peers and friends in more rural, middle-of-the-country

areas. “Messages of Queer Underground Rebellion” expands upon the argument from Chapter 2, utilizing LGBTQ+ zines to show yet another way the characteristics of the queer underground film movement spread, as well as how expansive and resilient the queer underground community was throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Finally, Chapter 4, “Teaching the Underground: Pedagogy, Play & Conceptions of the Queer Underground,” focuses on the queer underground in the classroom, and how something that seems on its surface, anti-institutional, has been taken up and supported within academic institutions. The maps and travels in Chapters 2 and 3 both presented a significant overlap with academic institutions that were especially invested in film studies, and Chapter 4 will take up this overlap and how queer underground film gets taken up in a studio classroom setting. These classroom spaces not only informed and trained new generations of film artists, but they also provided strongholds in community building by providing screenings and events to welcome in interested community members. Kuchar, once again, offers a crucial representation of a larger practice, wherein many of the members of the queer underground film movement in NYC eventually migrated elsewhere, oftentimes taking up positions in universities across the country. Therefore, in this chapter, we return to George Kuchar and his role as pedagogue at the San Francisco Art Institute, which he held for almost four decades. This chapter utilizes materials from the Harvard Film Archives, namely student evaluations that were in Kuchar’s possession, as well as some of the films that were made in Studio Kuchar, and selections of writing from both Kuchar and a few of his students. The goal of this chapter is to show how the queer underground film movement was undertaken in the classroom by laying out how the four main characteristics manifested and were preserved in Studio Kuchar, as well as how it provided a kind of repository for many queer underground creators. Furthermore, by incorporating

scholarship about the creation of film studies from scholars like Michael Zryd, this chapter highlights how the queer underground film movement, its members, and its characteristics were sustained by academic institutions despite the movements' somewhat anti-institutional bent. "Teaching the Underground" takes Kuchar's studio as an example of a larger movement of queer underground creators finding stability in the academic institution and shows how the ethos of the movement translated into the classroom in a way that bolstered community and prolonged the spread of queer underground film movement.

Conclusion

The queer underground film movement deserves to be explored as deeply and wholly as any film movement, and to be given its own specifications and characteristics that differentiate it from a larger underground film tradition. As previously mentioned, when the queer underground film movement is left entangled within the larger scope of underground film, many creators and specific styles and sentiments are overlooked and are not taken up earnestly. One of those creators is George Kuchar, and his work tells the story of a more community-oriented, and unserious queer underground that thrived well beyond the 1960s. While it is understandable to focus on the initial explosion of a film movement, the afterlife or the reverberations created by that explosion should be just as worthy of our focus. Tracing Kuchar's travels and the flow of LGBTQ+ zines across the country provide pathways for how the characteristics of the queer underground film movement spread and took root in invested communities. Furthermore, the spread of these characteristics and the pathways forged by the zines and/or Kuchar can speak more broadly to the expansiveness of the queer underground community and how queer folks found each other and art that spoke their language, even if they lived in rural, inland spaces that may have felt untenable to queer livelihoods. This project not only aims to shine light on George

Kuchar, LGBTQ+ zines and many of the unsung members of the queer underground film movement, but it also hopes to open up the door to deeper investigations of the characteristics and categorization of queer underground film movement and the community that formed alongside it.

CHAPTER 1:
READING FOR FILTH:
A QUEER DISGUST AESTHETIC

Introduction

In a 1991 issue of zine *Holy Titclamps*, “Not Another Queer Manifesto,” advocated for LGBTQ+ folks to travel throughout the rural and suburban United States and kiss in public. They wrote, “People are ignorant – they don’t have any concept of what is humanly possible, and the shock will hopefully kill them.”⁵⁴ The imagery of queer kissing was also heavily utilized in ACT UP zine-style posters during the late 1980s and early 1990s, in their “Kissing Doesn’t Kill,” and “Read My Lips”⁵⁵ ads, both as a way to fight the stigma against AIDS and LGBTQ+ communities, as well as draw in participants for their Kiss-In, a 9-day activism event, in 1988. This radical act of kissing in public during the height of the AIDS epidemic, and the fear mongering that came along with it, only works to disrupt on the basis of mainstream culture’s adherence to LGBTQ+ sexuality and queerness being taboo, filthy, and most importantly, disgusting. These ads and messages use this formulation of queerness equating to disgust to incite shock in straight viewers. Here, disgust has radically political potential, in that it responds to an ingrained moralized hierarchy of propriety and cultural value that demonized queer communities during and following the AIDS epidemic. However, there is a two-fold response here – one, being the horrified heterosexual, and two, the intrigued budding queer. “Not Another Queer Manifesto” doesn’t stop with these shock-inducing displays aimed towards straight audiences, it also uses these “disgusting” displays to attract fellow queer folks and create community. The manifesto continues, “But remember, the primary purpose isn’t to shock breeders – who gives a shit about them, anyway – but to wake up potential queers, who may be scared to death of you this week but will be improvising their own outfits next week.”⁵⁶ In this

⁵⁴ Richards, Laurence (Larry-bob). 1991. *Holy titclamps*. MN: Larry-bob. Print.

⁵⁵ *Kissing doesn't kill AIDS awareness poster for Act Up*. 1990.

⁵⁶ Richards, Laurence (Larry-bob). 1991. *Holy titclamps*. MN: Larry-bob. Print.

regard, disgust can be fascinating; it can draw us in – if we are open to certain sensibilities. In the queer underground film movement and the larger queer underground community, this queer disgust aesthetic is one of the avenues to building community, as it will quickly turn away folks who are not invested in a gender and heteronormative critical viewpoint, who are not willing to explore more disruptive and disgusting content. And on the flip side, it will draw in audience and community members that are attuned to and intrigued by a queer underground sensibility, reflective of the four characteristics I set out in the introduction. Beyond what may be an initial gross-out response, the queer underground community member willingly returns for a second, deeper experience to investigate, and potentially, celebrate.

It is this doubled potentiality of disgust, the ability to shock and entice, that this chapter is invested in exploring.⁵⁷ Particularly, the ability of disgust, or a queer disgust aesthetic, to entice new queer underground community members, to act as a kind of signpost for invested audiences, is what I am interested in unpacking. In aesthetics, disgust has been a contested subject, first being considered the antithesis to the field, and later being reintroduced in feminist and queer readings. Thanks to the work of scholars like Carolyn Korsmeyer and others, disgust has found solid footing within the field, and has been more deeply explored to parse out the potential reactions it elicits. In Korsmeyer's *Savoring Disgust*, she responds to Kant and Aristotle, among others, and argues that no matter how disagreeable disgust is, it “can rivet attention to the point where one may actually be said to *savor* the feeling.”⁵⁸ For Korsmeyer, the disavowal of disgust is due in part to the fact that it is generally represented or discussed in its most extreme form and

⁵⁷ This chapter relies on previous work of mine, namely my Master's Thesis, completed at Oklahoma State University in 2018. The current iteration of this chapter is intended to be a revision and correction of the earlier version, incorporating more queer theory, discussion of queer communities, and a more nuanced understanding of the materials.

⁵⁸ Korsmeyer, Carolyn, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

little work has been done to explore the nuances of this particular affect, the subtleties and variations of how it appears. She notes, “It functions one way in comedy, another in satire or politically provocative art, another in tragedy, and each instance differs from the others.”⁵⁹ Disgust as an aesthetic category is utilized frequently in many of the queer underground works that I have encountered, but it has yet to be deeply investigated or defined. At times it may be written off as a trash aesthetic, or as coming out of a grungy, punk scene, but disgust has not been addressed as a facet of the queer underground, nor as a tool to attract or detract certain audiences or community members. While other forms of cinematic disgust have been discussed at length, they tend to focus more on the shock aspect of disgust. Shock is absolutely an integral part of the theorization of disgust, but what happens when we are no longer shocked? How does disgust function to instead make us laugh, or make us question? In this piece, I aim to continue drawing out the subtleties of disgust, not only by laying out more instances in which it can elicit pleasure – specifically within queer underground film, but also by addressing its subversive, queer community-building abilities.

Before going any further, some clarification is necessary regarding what I mean when I say “queer underground community.” This phrasing could easily be taken as an essentialist understanding of queer identities, wherein all LGBTQ+ folks would be drawn into a queer disgust aesthetic due to the era’s larger societal connotations of queerness being equated to filthiness and sexual taboo. However, to claim that all members of the LGBTQ+ community – out or not – would be inherently attracted to a queer disgust aesthetic would be hasty and faulty. There is no monolith of queerness that stands against time, and even in an era where the queer experience was heavily shaped by external oppressions and representations, there is no catch-all

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

aesthetic to represent or to attract every person on the LGBTQ+ spectrums. So, what queer communities would latch on or be intrigued by this aesthetic? If there were to be a Venn diagram of the queer community and the underground community, the overlapping section would include a community of folks that are not only media literate, but they are deeply critical of media, heteronormative and gender normative ideals, and are able to mimic and retool the popular trends with LGBTQ+ experiences in mind. There is a strong subversive energy paired with an experimental playfulness with tools and materials at hand. It can be likened to Prudence Bussey-Chamberlain's work on "queer poetics of flippancy," wherein flippancy acts as a queer strategy that welcomes readings that investigate politics, identity and assimilation. She writes, "It could be argued, then, that flippancy itself is a point of tension, in which the lightness always engages with a greater sense of seriousness. The unbecoming levity clearly demonstrated through the work does not betray depth or politics, but rather creates a more dynamic relationship with radicalism that demands gravitas and commitment."⁶⁰ While Bussey-Chamberlain is speaking specifically about poetry in her text, this focus on flippancy as an avenue in which to critique politics and to align oneself with radicalism can provide some clarity on our queer underground community. The folks within the queer community that would get drawn into a queer disgust aesthetic would be ones that have enough media awareness to be critical of mainstream conceptions of queerness, to wield and understand "flippancy" or a lightheartedness as an avenue to deep criticism and would be able to sit with or linger on disgust long enough to find meaning. Therefore, I will refer to this group of folks as "queer underground communities" for the remainder of this chapter.

⁶⁰ Bussey-Chamberlain, Dr. Prudence. *Queer Troublemakers: the Poetics of Flippancy*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. (2)

Now, in order to address and define a queer disgust aesthetic, it is integral to draw up the history of disgust in aesthetics in order to show how queer and feminist aesthetics can work to reground disgust in these conversations. Furthermore, this entwined history of disgust and aesthetics will take us to Korsmeyer's work on disgust and I will address how a queer disgust aesthetic can take the conversation of disgust and aesthetics further. Then, I move to define a queer disgust aesthetic, as well as dig into the work of queer underground filmmaker, George Kuchar, as a case study of how this aesthetic operates within the practice of film. The queer disgust aesthetic that I propose can rely on shock to turn off straight and/or mainstream viewers, but it can also move beyond shock and provide moments of quotidian intimacy, as well as unseriousness. Finally, by drawing on theories of queer relationality and the ability to create community through refusal and subversion, I will argue and show how a queer disgust aesthetic can create and call for community.

Tracing Disgust in Aesthetics

The difficulty of thinking about the relationship between disgust and aesthetics stems from an incongruity of sorts: If art, as the domain of the beautiful, is meant to be visually pleasing, then how can disgust, an affect that induces a stay-away impulse, reside within aesthetics? Due to this conflict, disgust has been essentially barred from many early discussions of aesthetics. This in part stems from the foundational characteristics of aesthetics as centered on beauty and pleasure. For much of the early discussions of aesthetics, the possibility of disgust to inspire cognitive responses, or to be visually beautiful, was denied. The exclusion of disgust from the category of the aesthetic, on account of its inability to produce a cognitive response (as opposed to a simply physical or instinctual one) or critical reflection, is directly related to Immanuel Kant's classifications of the five senses in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*,

wherein he divides them into two groups: the outer and inner senses, or the high and low senses. For Kant, touch, sight and hearing are senses that relate back to cognitive function, whereas smell and taste are more subjective and embodied. Touch, sight and hearing, according to Kant, require further elaboration beyond the initial sensory event, whereas smell and taste are already interiorized by way of entering the body through the mouth and nostrils.⁶¹ Disgust operates by activating these two lower senses, and does not require or inspire any cognitive response, therefore falling outside the umbrella of Kant's aesthetics. In fact, in his book, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, Winfried Menninghaus argues that the eighteenth century's discussions of aesthetics "can be described negatively as a foundation based on prohibition of what is disgusting. The 'aesthetic' is the field of a particular 'pleasure' whose absolute other is disgust."⁶² In this estimation of aesthetics during this era, Menninghaus unearths the popular conception of disgust as what aesthetics *is not*, as the necessary other which shaped these discussions of pleasure.

Kant's aesthetics was instrumental in this categorical exclusion of disgust. In "On the Relation of Genius to Taste," from *Critique of Judgment*, Kant briefly explains the relation of disgust to art. According to him, the power of art is its ability to take something that would be deemed unsatisfactory or ugly in reality, and to turn it into something that creates visual pleasure.⁶³ However, this aesthetic power does not change disgust, or changes it too much. Kant says of disgust: "For in that strange sensation, which rests on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it insisted...on our enjoying it even though that is just what we are forcefully resisting; and hence the artistic presentation of the object is no longer distinguished in our

⁶¹ Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Translated by Robert B. Louden. (2006) p. 45-49

⁶² Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003). 7

⁶³ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. (2010) p. 180

sensation from the nature of this object itself.”⁶⁴ This introduces a number of important details regarding disgust, the first being that disgust disables the aesthetic response. For Kant, aesthetic responses require a form of disinterested distance to allow for critical insight that comes from being able to separate the object from the aesthetic response. However, with disgust, this isn’t possible because the recreated disgusting object creates a too-close relationship to the real-world object, and the required distance cannot be attained. The aesthetic is defined against the interiorized response of the lower senses, and thus the incorporative nature of smell and taste suggests an inability of the viewer to properly separate their relation to the object. As indicated by Kant, disgust seems characterized by a push-pull experience of attraction and repulsion by which the viewer is drawn to the artistic presentation but repelled by the recreation of a disgusting object. However, here we can look to feminist aesthetic theory to disrupt the hold that Kantian ideals had on aesthetic theory traditions.

As feminist scholars became invested in aesthetic theories, the field began to unfold in possibilities for some of the overlooked affects and aesthetics. In “Role of Feminist Aesthetics,” Hilda Hein argues that feminist aesthetics preceded feminist theory, and that it is in fact integral to feminism. Hein writes, “Seeking to define the area of feminist aesthetics we have found neither a body of truths nor a central dogma, but an instrument for reframing questions.” For Hein, then, feminist aesthetics does not have one set of truths, but instead operates as a tool for reframing questions and concepts that allows for new perspectives and experiences to emerge.⁶⁵ In this conceptualization of aesthetics, then, there is no essentialist binaries or definitions of what can invoke pleasure or aesthetic interests, but instead feminist aesthetics operates as a tool to

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Hein, Hilde. "The Role of Feminist Aesthetics in Feminist Theory." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48, no. 4 (1990): 281-91., 286

question those entrenched ideals. In this understanding of aesthetics, we can then use aesthetics to question the binaristic understandings of disgust and expand our own understandings of its capabilities. Instead of separating out the affects into low or high or good or bad, feminist aesthetics allows us to throw out those organizational structures and instead investigate the affect and its aesthetic based on the context of the piece, the moment, the artist, etc. This shift in aesthetic theory has opened the door to expand investigations of disgust aesthetics and makes room for other responses to disgust beyond immediate rejection.

Then, just as queer theory came out of feminist studies, queer aesthetics also become a significant area of interest following feminist aesthetics. In Whitney Davis' *Queer Beauty*, she addresses Kant's belief that sexual/erotic attraction needed to be overcome before making an aesthetic judgement and argues that in fact they have always already been imbricated and cannot be separated. This notion of Kant's, that to correctly view and judge an artwork, the viewer must be rid of their erotic attraction to get at the truth of the aesthetic object operates on the Cartesian mind/body dualism, which is yet another concept that feminism and queer theories have worked to undermine, as there is no separation in embodiment. So, in Kant's strain of aesthetics, the body and its urges were something to overcome to view and take in artworks more purely. This led to his understanding of disgust, that a disgusting object would enable a too-bodily reaction – the physical urge to reject – which would disrupt the ability to critically ruminate on said object. However, in queer and feminist scholarly traditions, this concept of mind/body dualism has been largely debunked as we have come to understand that the mind and the body are inseparably linked together, and our bodies greatly shape our lived experiences. So, in terms of disgust aesthetics, the body's reaction no longer needs to be overcome; it needs to be taken seriously and considered as a valid response to the work. Under the traditions of queer and feminist aesthetics,

disgust can be taken up as an aesthetic and analyzed for how it makes the body and the mind react. So, we must also investigate why or how a disgust aesthetic may not invoke the traditional rejection response.

The disavowal of disgust within aesthetics that eighteenth century theorists utilized to discuss pleasure and aesthetics relied upon a very limited definition of disgust. In 1929, Aurel Kolnai wrote his analysis of disgust, which largely went ignored by English-speaking theorists until 2004. This was deeply unfortunate, as Kolnai raised some aspects of disgust that became the groundwork for its inclusion within aesthetics. Specifically, in these studies, disgust is not thought of as an immediate response, dictated by physical sensations, nor do the incorporative properties of taste and smell disable an aesthetic engagement. Instead, disgust can produce an aesthetic attitude toward the seemingly revolting object by introducing a pause in the viewer's response, thereby inviting an extended reaction that can convert aversion into enjoyment. Kolnai's phenomenological analysis provides a definition of the qualities of the object that produces disgust. As he explains,

the object of disgust is prone to be connected with something that is concealed, secretive, multilayered, uncanny, sinister, as well as with something which is shameless, obtrusive, and alluring: that is, in sum, to be something which is taunting. Everything that is disgusting has in it something which is at one and the same time both striking and veiled, as is, say, a poisonous red berry or a garishly made-up face.⁶⁶

Kolnai asserts that disgust can be both alluring and repellent, and that it may even be "veiled" in something other than a putrid outward appearance. In this estimation of disgust, it demands attention while also reserving some kind of unknowable quality that urges a second look, a longer look. This disrupts much of what disgust is thought to look like and feel like, and further

⁶⁶ Kolnai, Aurel. *On Disgust*. Edited by Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer. (2004) p. 47

exploration of the aesthetics of this expanded conception of disgust allows for a contemplative response to the object, rather than pure rejection.

Disgust can be fascinating; it can draw us in. Beyond an initial gross-out response, the subject willingly returns for a second, deeper experience to investigate. It harkens to an experience I imagine many have witnessed, wherein one smells something gross, something disgusting, and even though it sets into motion a rejection response, what follows is a sort of searching out of the reek. A deeper sniff to find the source, to find what exactly caused the scent, and in that second experience with disgust, there is a tinge of pleasure. Here, we can revisit Korsmeyer and her thorough work on the possibilities of disgust as a source of attraction and pleasure. *Savoring Disgust* greatly expands the potential reactions to disgust in aesthetics from just the traditional discussion of disgust resulting in ejection, as scatological disgust, for example, can elicit laughter and shock rather than an automatic nausea. Furthermore, Korsmeyer's reevaluation of disgust entails an expansion of the notion of pleasure. She considers pleasure to be more than just a positive response to "absorption in an activity."⁶⁷ While this does allow for more instances of pleasure within aesthetics, though, it still doesn't answer Korsmeyer's main question: "Why would one be absorbed in something revolting?"⁶⁸ Building from Aristotle's "paradox of fiction," in which he discussed the potential for tragedy to produce a pleasurable aesthetic experience, Korsmeyer offers, instead, a "paradox of aversion," wherein despite the aversive effects of disgust, there is the possibility of a positive experience. One of Korsmeyer's examples involves food – specifically food items like durian, the ortolan bird, and other odious examples that in one way or another, both deter the diner from eating them and also

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

entice them, creating what she calls “the conversion of the disgusting into the delicious.”⁶⁹ What these discussions of disgust propose is that disgust is not simply inherent to the object, but instead, comes from the attitude towards the object. To take Korsmeyer’s example, in its original form, durian is an unappealing, thorny looking fruit, and when cut open dispels a rancid odor. However, when prepared and offered up as an “exotic” or avant-garde dish, even despite the lingering smell, the attitude changes toward the fruit and it can be savored and enjoyed with semblances of disgust still intact, and, in some cases, with disgust heightening the pleasure of the meal.

Disgust then, can be more specifically reflective of the shared attitude towards a particular object rather than the intrinsic elements of the object. In this understanding of disgust, it can operate as a social tool beyond just an instinctual self-preservation response towards a dangerous object. For example, someone may respond with disgust to something as innocuous as a person picking their teeth after a meal at a shared dinner table. This action does not have any dangerous or toxic outcomes, but because of our shared social contracts, stepping outside of the bounds of propriety may also elicit disgust reactions. According to Korsmeyer and Barry Smith, in their introduction to *On Disgust* by Kolnai, disgust “is an emotion with a highly complex psychology and one that cannot be classed as simply a mechanism that provides quick protection against the dangers that flow from ingesting toxins. It is in fact a highly cognitive emotion....”⁷⁰ This assessment of disgust’s properties comes not only from Kolnai’s account of disgust, but also from advancements made on the psychology of disgust responses. Haidt et al. address this specifically in “Body, Psyche, and Culture: The Relationship between Disgust and Morality,” a study that asked people from different cultural backgrounds what they would consider

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁷⁰ Smith, Barry, and Carolyn Korsmeyer. "Visceral Values: Aurel Kolnai on Disgust." In *On Disgust*, 1-28. (2004)

disgusting. This allowed the group of psychologists to delineate different kinds of disgust, breaking it down into three groups:⁷¹ “core disgust,” wariness around contaminated or toxic foods or products that if ingested either by smell or by taste, could cause bodily harm and/or vomiting; “animal reminder disgust,” elicited by objects and/or images that invoke a sentiment of “undignified use or modification of the temple,” the “temple” here stemming out of the faith-based belief of the body being a sort of haven for the soul; and “socio-moral disgust” which refers to a disgust evoked by social issues like racism, disagreeable politics, homophobia etc. that tends to be variable based on culture and time period.⁷² These formulations of disgust, then, deny that it only resides in bodily reactions ruled by instincts. If the role of disgust encompasses more than just bodily reactions, then it can take on psychological and moral components that are dictated by social and cultural norms – like LGBTQ+ and queer sexualities and sensibilities.

Here, disgust is finally enveloped within the field of aesthetics, but it also can and does operate on shared sociocultural beliefs. This means that disgust can and does look and operate differently based on the surrounding culture – which is key for addressing at how a queer disgust aesthetic was utilized by queer underground communities. Korsmeyer’s work takes disgust very far and investigates how it can invoke pleasure when faced with a distinctly disgusting object. However, what has not been investigated is how this queered, pleasure-inducing disgust can be portrayed in moving image, nor how it can become a potential tool to respond to mainstream culture and build community.

⁷¹ Haidt, Jonathan, Paul Rozin, Clark McCauley, and Sumio Imada. "Body, Psyche, and Culture: The Relationship between Disgust and Morality." *Psychology and Developing Societies* (1997)

⁷² *Ibid.*, 111, 112, 121.

A Queer Disgust Aesthetic: George Kuchar Case Study

A queer disgust aesthetic is one that elicits connection or closeness despite the potential danger or shock that comes alongside these more positive reactions. The first facet of a queer disgust aesthetic is utilizing this disgust-borne-shock as a kind of tool or weapon. In this role, disgust may be an affective response that rejects and/or ejects what is dangerous or odious to the body. This more traditional definition treats disgust as a physical reaction to items like rotting food, dangerous substances, etc., that induces vomiting, or some other significant activity of removal from the vicinity of the body.⁷³ Eugenie Brinkema, film theorist and author of *The Forms of the Affects*, takes this action of recoiling as a spatial operation of disgust that delimits “zones of proximity that are discomforting versus acceptable.”⁷⁴ This aspect of disgust, then, understands it as a form of instinctual self-preservation, keeping away from items that could lead to death, that are impure. So, how then do we understand this formulation of disgust as a kind of weapon?

First, it is important to reckon with the historical context of this moment to see a lingering fascination with the obscenity trials of the 1970s and a heightened attention to what was or wasn’t considered too risqué for the public. From its first issue, *Holy Titclamps* makes clear its positionality in regard to the shame and respectability politics that emanated from the media storm surrounding the AIDS epidemic, as well as the controversies surrounding obscenity laws and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Senator Jesse Helms, who advocated against the use of national funding of artworks that he deemed obscene after a Robert Mapplethorpe opening as well as *Piss Christ* by Andres Serrano, said, “The use of taxpayers’

⁷³ Tomkins, Silvan S. *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: The Complete Edition*. New York, NY: Springer Pub., 2008.

⁷⁴ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 130

dollars by the National Endowment for the Arts ('NEA') to subsidize offensive and obscene 'art' – in effect, to subsidize the efforts of moral relativists to undermine America's Judeo-Christian heritage and morality – is such a threat to the future of our nation."⁷⁵ Queer underground communities, like those who took part in *Holy Titclamps*, were hyper-aware of the struggle for artistic freedom, especially when it came to obscene or unbecoming content. These conversations of what was a "threat to the future of our nation" coaligned with the rise of the New Right and the specifically anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments within conservative parties, all of which worked to shove queer folks and perspectives back into the closet in favor of keeping the patriarchal and heteronormative nuclear family safe. In part, the queer disgust aesthetic is responding to this historical moment and the treatment of the AIDS epidemic, specifically being taken up in underground spaces wherein there tends to be less institutional red tape. And so, these instances of shocking, rejection-inducing disgust rely on the knowledge and understanding that queer people are deemed disgusting during this time, and it is using this formulation to incite shock in straight viewers.

Taking the queer kissers example, blatantly displaying queer love and intimacy in these traditionally straight and family spaces is a rebellion against the assumption that these displays should be kept behind closeted doors, but if it operates on this rejection response, it can also insure some space between the queer kissers and the potentially dangerous looker-on. Now, it is imperative to recognize the privilege here in both being a part of a larger group when engaging in these shock displays and performing it in daylight and in the faux-safety of a mall – given a different setting, this kind of display may in fact welcome risk and harm in the shape of hate crimes, especially during this era. However, in this formulation, of a group of queer folks going

⁷⁵ Helms, Jesse. "Is It Art of Tax-Paid Obscentiy - The NEA Controversy," *Journal of Law and Policy* 2 (1994): 99

to a mall and kissing, the disgust it creates within straight/bigoted viewers, forces a distance by way of rejection. Straight viewers could feasibly be so disgusted by these displays that they would in fact make a beeline in the opposite direction, leaving our queer kissers in temporary, fleeting peace. Likewise, oftentimes in film, disgust is utilized as a harbinger of shock – similar to the shock induced by “Not Another Queer Manifesto” and its rebellious queer kissing. Disgust can be utilized in the queer underground as this shock device to weaponize against the gazing and uncomfortable heterosexuals. This style of disgust is also prevalent in the early works of John Waters, wherein shock and awe play a distinct role – take *Pink Flamingos* (1972), when Divine eats the dog shit, the goal is to be outlandish, to shock and repel, and while it can lead to laughter, it is still foregrounding the shock and working out of excess disgust.

While this formulation of shocking and weaponized disgust is a facet of the queer disgust aesthetic, it somewhat operates as an entry-level play with disgust. Traditionally, disgust is one of the potential tools of the patriarchy, the hegemony, that results in shame and attempts to correct those who do not fit within the ideal mold. But, here, disgust has become a site of resistance. It may have begun as a weapon against queer communities, especially during the AIDS epidemic, but in the work of the queer underground, it has been taken up as a tool or toy that we can brandish as well. It still utilizes disgust as it has been used before, instead now, the queer underground community has the ability to wield it and turn it against oppressive peoples and forces. So, while the usage of a traditional disgust aesthetic has been queered in the sense that it is now a tool of the marginalized and underground queer communities, it is still basing disgust in the shock response. The next level of a queer disgust aesthetic, then, must push beyond utilizing disgust as an always-shocking object or response. To get at this more advanced queer

disgust aesthetic, it will be helpful to look at the video works of queer underground filmmaker, George Kuchar.

For Kuchar, then, his video diaries display a different kind of disgust, one that can be broken down into three main elements: quotidian, intimate, and unserious. In these three representations, the disgust can lead to laughter, as well as a sense of closeness and/or comfortability. Quotidian disgust refers to the representations of disgust that harken to the everyday disgust that we all experience just by way of having bodies, as well as the way it is presented – as daily, normal occurrences, rather than built up to relay shock. Oftentimes, when the term “disgust” is thrown around, there is an assumption that there will be horrific gore and shocking displays of violence. But Kuchar’s video works force us to contend with the disgusting that resides within us that is just waiting to burst forth – the daily, bodily disgust. The primary focus of bodily disgust within Kuchar’s oeuvre is that of digestion and the path his junk food takes on its way out. This is especially true in his Oklahoma video diaries, when he is hunkered down in a run-down motel and only able to eat what the local convenience store has to offer. A regular food item of choice is white powdered doughnuts, the mini variety that can be bought in a pack of six. In *Weather Diary 3* as well as *Supercell*, he overstuffs his mouth with them and talks through the obstructive food. Puffs of the white powdered sugar are expelled from his mouth, as well as spewed pieces of spit-covered doughnuts. He eats canned Vienna sausages (*Supercell*), a plethora of candy (*We*, *The Normal* and *Song of the Whoopee Wind*), Lil’ Caesar’s pizza (*Weather Diary 6*), plates full of Jell-O (*Weather Diary 3*), boiled hot dogs (*Weather Diary 3*), slop-like homemade meals (*Cult of the Cubicles*), and a banana, presumably as a sexual reference in *Weather Diary 6*. Furthermore, in *Video Album 5: The Thursday People*, Kuchar joins a friend to eat at what seems like a cultural food fair. These shots of the process of cooking

and preparing the meat connect it to the animal carcasses as its source, such that what is edible is presented with the inedible, the leftover bones and cartilage that typically goes uneaten. Here, the food is not glamorized, it is not mouthwatering; instead, it reconnects it to the production of food and how it fulfills an emptiness in the attendees. The close-ups on the masticating mouths emphasizes the hunger drive, and later, his flatulence emphasizes the digestions process. In his video diaries, he discusses digestion before eating, connecting the food he's about to eat to the eructation, flatulence and feces that will follow. These belches and farts occur sporadically throughout his body of work, and in *500 Millibars to Ecstasy*, Kuchar makes note of this after a bout of flatulence and says, "Every video has to have at least one gas outburst." And of course, this all ends in the toilet, which Kuchar regularly records after use.

These quotidian facets of the queer disgust aesthetic not only work to highlight the disgust we all face in our daily lives, but it also reflects a kind of pacing within the works. While these close-ups of his filled and chewing mouth may seem jarring, the quantity and presentation of these moments becomes normalized. Taking *Pink Flamingos* as a counterpoint, the pacing of the film builds up to the moments of heightened disgust, using the characters to react to the disgusting content with surprise and shock. For example, when Divine receives the feces from The Marbles, this is a pivoting moment where her reaction to this "gift" becomes the driving force for the rivalry that continues for the rest of the film. These moments of disgust are ramped up as the film continues, each one relaying another level of shock to add to the absurdity of the world John Waters created.

However, in Kuchar's video diaries, his reaction to his own filth is minimal. While he may display a sense of anxiety about his body and it's disgusting emissions, he is not shocked or surprised and considering how frequently he records them, he doesn't seem deeply ashamed. His

attitude towards what would traditionally be seen as disgusting is consistent throughout his video works, and it relays a slight fascination, as lighthearted comfortability, and at times, a sense of anxiety (which tends to heighten as his body ages). Furthermore, in terms of pacing, the disgusting objects don't stack in the same way as they do in *Pink Flamingos*, in that they don't seem to accumulate to a shocking, uber disgusting finish. Instead, they perform like records of Kuchar's life, records of his meals, his digestion, and the products of the two. And because these objects or instances of disgust are bodily, the pacing, Kuchar's reactions, and the fact that any audience member would have similar body experiences, these moments of disgust do not result in the same kind of shock or rejection, and instead endear us to Kuchar. He welcomes audiences to be just as invested in his body and its functions as he is, and in that, it can even allow for a self-reflection about one's own humanness and imbrication within disgust.

Intimate disgust is particularly about the spatiality between the disgusting object/content and the viewer. This form of disgust is one that draws viewers in closer, directly upending the physical rejection response and requiring a closeness with disgust. In Kuchar's work, closeness comes from his utilization of a consistent camera angle that has been in his repertoire since his early film career. In this familiar maneuver, he positions the camera slightly below his chin, angled upwards, in order to emphasize his mouth and its contents. Referring to this camera angle, Juan A. Suárez suggests that "the Kuchars' penchant for narrowing down the visual field and rubbing the spectator's nose in the action enacts a return of the repressed – smell and therefore bodily waste – and this return is communicated by visual proximity"⁷⁶. The close-up angle distorts his face, making his chin and lower lip protrude and his jaw line exaggerated and uneven. All the while, the viewer is positioned to look directly up his nostrils. On its own, this

⁷⁶ Suárez, Juan Antonio. "The Kuchars, the 1960s and Queer Materiality." *Screen* 56, no. 1 (March 01, 2015): 37

angle is surprising, but more often than not, Kuchar uses this angle, as Suárez notes, to overemphasize his repellent bodily functions and draw viewers closer. In part, the camera acts as a bib for Kuchar's waste, as it is positioned right below his nose and mouth and it records his bodily oozes as they move closer to the lens, and thus, closer to the audience. This camera angle is also used when Kuchar highlights his nasal emissions in *Award* (1992) and *Metropolitan Monologues* (2000). In *Award*, Kuchar is worried about his stench. This obsession with odor is paired with Kuchar's telltale angle, but here, his nose drips with a long thread of snot, headed right for the camera lens. As he talks about how he could have gotten deodorant, his nose is at the center of the frame. These formal choices focus on the sense of smell, representable only indirectly by film, and prompts an inquisitiveness in viewers that refers them back to their own bodies: What does he smell like? What do *I* smell like? Furthermore, when thinking through the title, *Weather Diary*, the diary is extremely intimate, initially written for the author's eyes only. Once a diary is taken to the public, its sentimental intimacy of the author's writings enact a too-close response. A diary may create an uncomfortable proximity to the raw emotions or cloying guilelessness of its author. For Kuchar to call these videos "diaries" is to purposely undermine their seriousness and to invite viewers into the intimate spaces of his life. The use of a term like "journal" might have retained more masculine and less privatized and emotional connotations, but Kuchar strategically embraces a lighthearted presentation of self. In intimate disgust, the viewer is brought in too close, both literally by way of the handheld close-ups, and metaphorically in being given insider access to all the minutia of Kuchar's life.

And lastly, unserious disgust is a specific lighthearted representation of disgust that occurs in artworks/moving images to work against the inherent seriousness that comes with being categorized as film art. Unseriousness is a tethering element here, between the queer disgust

aesthetic and the queer underground film movement. This shared characteristic is key in poking fun at the larger contextual structures of film, art, and social expectations of disgust. Within the queer disgust aesthetic, unseriousness is primarily about the context in which the film works are labeled and viewed, meaning that it subverts and disrupts our expectations about what film art looks like and the feelings it should elicit. For Kuchar, we can already look at his subject matter previously discussed as an unserious display, as he takes his body and travels up as important and relevant content to record. But beyond that, Kuchar is an extremely relevant case study in this regard, as he came out of the NYC underground where film was the norm, and then switched over to video without taking part in the more experimental video traditions of filmmakers like Nam June Paik, Steina and Woody Vasulka, etc. Due to these changes in his filmmaking career, Kuchar can be somewhat cross-listed in terms of how his work is conceived of within the film art world, and his chosen content and medium mark his work as somewhat amateur and lacking the seriousness of other works in these traditions. Kuchar offers his own corporeal metaphor for the ways that video disrupts the “fixed boundaries” of standard film practice, a metaphor that makes clear the link between disgust and his choice of technological format. In his *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*, co-authored with his brother Mike, George writes:

To many, the purity of film is being threatened by the explosive eruption of video. That eruption was making a lump in my much despised jockey briefs. I tried to hide the stink from my cohorts but it was of no use. The camcorder revolution was just what the doctor ordered...a laxative of cheap non-stop imagery endowed with high flatulating fidelity. I finally lowered my briefs and let drop the digested dollops of diaristic diarrhea. My video career had begun!⁷⁷

In switching from film to video, Kuchar was not only choosing to use a cheaper, more accessible format that fell in line with, and even amplified, his already gritty and low-brow, queer disgust aesthetic, he was also choosing a medium that was largely derided by more “serious” film artists

⁷⁷ George Kuchar and Mike Kuchar, *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool* (Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997), 123.

and audiences. This choice to record his day-to-day happenings, primarily when travelling, in video acts as a refusal of the art world's gate-keeping in regard to form and quality. Kuchar spoke on this point again in his own ornate manner: "Making cheap video productions is easy because you'll be automatically thought of as cheap as soon as you purchase a camcorder (even though some of them go for a hefty sum). Buying a video camera will definitely cause other artists' creative juices to flow, especially other filmmakers who will gladly spit at you with those juices."⁷⁸ This diminishment of the video medium is something Kuchar writes about frequently following his switch, and it affects the reception of Kuchar's work, and according to Reinke, "The work is unabashedly homemade, celebrating the technological possibilities (and reveling in the limitations) of consumer equipment. Despite the consummate skill Kuchar employs in all aspects of production, by industrial standards it is amateur rather than professional."⁷⁹ Regardless of all the expertise Kuchar shows within the medium over decades of honing his skills, Reinke suggests that there is no way to shed the amateur element that is connected to video. More importantly, Kuchar doesn't seem to want to shirk that label, and allows the amateur video aesthetic to take center stage in some of his diaries.

In this regard, Kuchar is working to undermine this standard of film that he is all too aware of, and to poke fun at the inherent seriousness of these film traditions. Beyond the medium and content choices, Kuchar's work is primarily taken up in academic film screenings, museums, and art galleries. These are all spaces that force a serious lens upon the works exhibited, as it comes with an assumption of hidden messages that can only be intuited through deep rumination, discussion and analysis. And while I am advocating for a deeper analysis of Kuchar's work, on the surface, his video diaries reject this perceived seriousness in place of lighthearted, enjoyable

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 55.

⁷⁹ Steve Reinke, "Excrements of Time: George Kuchar's Videos," *Millenium Film Journal*, no. 50 (2008): 56-7

videos of his fairly mundane travels. In the space of serious film art, then, Kuchar's videos work to upend and play with the viewers expectations, and this can be seen in screenings of his work, where giddy and surprised laughter bubbles up amongst the audience. An example of this is Kuchar's video about Curt McDowell's death – *The Thursday People*. While the film has some serious moments, as it reflects on the passing of Kuchar's ex-lover and friend, but it is interspersed with Kuchar attending a cultural food fair, eating and enjoying life. These moments between the serious leave a lingering lightness for the viewer. Even in the most disgusting moments, with Kuchar's body on full display, the unserious framing of the work allows for it to be read in comparison to the sometimes-tense regard for serious art, which can elicit even more of a freeing and joyous glee as his work feels attainable and easy to connect to on the basis of the quotidian and intimate disgust. In this way, Kuchar's work can function as a sort of reprieve from the highfalutin and sometimes unwelcoming space of serious art viewing and criticism and offer folks an accessible entryway into queer underground film. And so, through these lighthearted yet multi-faceted aspects of the advanced queer disgust aesthetic, these representations of disgust can operate similarly to our queer kissers – wherein viewers that are drawn in can become invested and ingrained into a larger community of queer underground film.

Disgust, Community & Camp

In working to define a queer disgust aesthetic, frictions arose between this aesthetic reading of disgust and other common conversations within queer theory and queer film practices, such as shame, Camp and the divisions between anti-social and relational formations of queerness. There is significant connective tissue between the queer community, queer theory and political uses of disgust, and it is overdue for an in-depth investigation. As of yet, disgust has not been taken up in depth within these conversations, but it has been in the background of some of

them, beginning with shame. In Sedgwick's "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*" from *Touching Feeling* in which she discusses the intersubjectivity of shame, she writes:

One of the strangest features of shame, but perhaps also the one that offers the most conceptual leverage for political projects, is the way bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment by someone else, someone else's embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell, or strange behavior, seemingly having nothing to do with me, can so readily flood me—assuming I'm a shame prone person—with this sensation whose very suffusiveness seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way possible.⁸⁰

Here, Sedgwick gives an account of this facet of shame, but within it, we can read for disgust. She pinpoints how these things like bad smell, embarrassment, etc. can lead to shame, even if it isn't something one experiences themselves. However, these are some of the ways that disgust can be weaponized to morally correct the behaviors of other – so in this instance we can even think about shame as a possible result of disgust. Even when thinking about the closet, one of Sedgwick's main sites of focus, what created the closet? Why would queer folks stay in the closet? Shame is why we stay there, but how does the shame manifest within us? Disgust is one of the potential tools of the patriarchy, the hegemony, that results in shame and attempts to correct those who do not fit within the ideal mold. Shame and disgust are, as Sedgwick aptly noted, sisters, and they work in tandem in order to keep queer and marginalized folks from resisting these cultural values of propriety. But, too, shame has become a site of resistance for some, and in the same vein, I am arguing that disgust has taken a similar turn. Now, it is important to draw these connections and find where the tensions can elicit new understandings – so how does a queer disgust aesthetic make its space within queer theories of camp and relationality?

⁸⁰ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006., 36-37

While I have already laid out an overlap between unseriousness and Camp in the queer underground film movement, there are more connections to be made with the queer disgust aesthetic. In theories of Camp, there is a particular kind of reading acquainted with being a queer audience member – a gay sensibility, as highlighted best by Jack Babuscio. In Babuscio’s article, “The Cinema of Camp (AKA Camp and the Gay Sensibility),” he writes that the gay sensibility is a “...creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one’s gayness.”⁸¹ This “perception of the world” is one that is used then to see the incongruities of camp and to highlight and play with those moments in early cinema as a way to retell the story in their own terms. Here, we can refer back to the unserious facet of the queer disgust aesthetic and the queer underground film movement. Especially when tethered to disgusting content, the valence of unseriousness can be taken up by viewers in different ways. In viewing Kuchar’s *Weather Diary 3* for the first time, surrounded by a mixed-bag of graduate student peers, there was a distinct divide in how my fellow audience members took on this lighthearted play with disgust. For some members of the class, these moments of unserious disgust, like Kuchar showing us his toilet full of shit, were just that – momentary gags that temporarily disrupted the flow of the piece. But for me and a few others who were more practiced in queer underground content, these moments of disgust were not something to be overlooked or ignored.

Drawing back to Sontag; she writes in “Notes on Camp,” about a split meaning within how camp is perceived. She writes, “Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which

⁸¹ Jack Babuscio, “The Cinema of Camp (AKA Camp and the Gay Sensibility),” in *Camp: Queer aesthetics and the performing subject: A reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 118.

some things can be taken. But this is not the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice.”⁸² Those attuned to a camp sensibility, then, can see the meaning in the *unserious* whereas those who are less attuned, would perceive it as “pure artifice.” In that sense, there is a difficulty in taking seriously the unserious because, much like Sontag argued about Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures*, “one has to *defend* it,” before even discussing it.⁸³ What others may see as meaningless or offensive, those with a camp and/or queer underground sensibility can see the meaning, whatever it may be, through the unserious presentation. These disgusting moments in Kuchar’s work had a particular stickiness to them, a stickiness that only adhered to those of us that desired further rumination on that shit-filled bowl, and the playful anxiety that came with it. Here, the reading isn’t necessarily always informed by sexuality, but more so informed by those who are willing to take seriously the unserious and read against the grain of their own initial lighthearted laughter.

We can return to Babuscio and unearth another similarity between unserious disgust and camp. He writes, “Camp, through its introduction of style, aestheticism, humour, and theatricality, allows us to witness ‘serious’ issues with temporary detachment, so that only later, after the event are we struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed.”⁸⁴ This temporary detachment is one that feels similar to the aesthetic “pause” in disgust as theorized by Korsmeyer and Kolnai, but it also addresses this notion of passively absorbing content to revisit with a more critical mindset later. While Babuscio is addressing serious content here, could there not also be an argument for witnessing unserious

⁸² Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays*. London etc., UK: Penguin Books, 2009, 281.

⁸³ Sontag, Susan. “A Feast for Open Eyes.” *The Nation*. April 13, 1964, 374.

⁸⁴ Jack Babuscio, “The Cinema of Camp (AKA Camp and the Gay Sensibility),” in *Camp: Queer aesthetics and the performing subject: A reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 128.

content with temporary detachment, and then ruminating on it later? Furthermore, in even being temporarily detached, could this be an explanation of how disgusting content can refrain from eliciting a rejection or shock response, and instead lead to a more unserious, quotidian and/or intimate understanding of the disgust? Here, we can even understand the ability to be temporarily detached as a brandished unseriousness, in that viewing serious content and employing these readings of lighthearted camp humor or theatricality already upends the serious intentions. Even though camp doesn't always, or even regularly, peddle in disgust, the theorization of how camp readings occur provide some insight on how exactly disgust can be read so differently from its traditional understanding.

Finally, I am invested in drawing out how a queer disgust aesthetic can community and how that relates to larger conversations within queer theory – specifically the division of queer antisocial and relational theses. In the most distilled understanding, the antisocial branch of queer theory has been solidified by the work of scholars like Lee Edelman, Leo Bersani, etc., and it formulates queerness as a radical rejection of the communal ideal. In this tradition, queerness is structured around difference and refusal of larger society, and the larger goals that come with that community. And while this work reigned supreme in queer theory throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, as we shifted to the 2010s, so did this narrative. With work from scholars like Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz and more, queer relationality began to form. Queer relationality followed in the footsteps of the antisocial thesis in that it doesn't deny that queerness is partially formulated by rejecting a status quo, but it highlighted that queerness is all about constituting communities through that refusal of the social order. This community formation in response to the social order and status quo is especially relevant in this discussion of a queer disgust aesthetic and its ability to draw in and create community.

First, it is necessary to address how disgust has been taken up within the tradition of the antisocial thesis. Going back to *Pink Flamingos*, Anna Breckon's piece on the film, "The Erotic Politics of Disgust: Pink Flamingos as Queer Political Cinema," argues that, in accordance with the antisocial thesis, the film rejects humanist progressive politics through a radical critique of humanism's primary ethical relation: empathy. Accordingly, where empathy has reigned supreme in its capacity to advance social inclusion, *Pink Flamingos* offers, in its place, a political mode of relationality based on disgust. Breckon writes:

By privileging filth – a structural position defined in opposition to the good – these films rage against redemptive politics, suggesting that the eradication of social antagonism is not only impossible but also undesirable. In the place of a utopian vision of social cohesion, Waters's early works elucidate the potential in embracing the critical, political and visceral space of social negativity.⁸⁵

In Breckon's formulation of filth in Waters' work, it is a kind of resistance to assimilation or "social cohesion," that fights back against normative notions of disgust as being opposed "to the good." Here, Breckon does the work to show how *Pink Flamingos* and its relationship with filth embraces the space of "social negativity," but in reading the rest of the piece, there are moments that we can read for queer community and relationality. For example, Breckon writes, "The characters are a collective, on the basis not of any shared identity or desire but of their mutual exclusion from any universal categories that enable access to the social order."⁸⁶ Within the framework of the film, Breckon is absolutely right – in opposing the normative societal structures and ideals, the crew of main characters create an outsider collective, or a community. These characters, Divine, Edie, Crackers and Cotton, come together to become a makeshift family, a community of non-conformists and troublemakers. And how is this not a direct

⁸⁵ Breckon, Anna; "The Erotic Politics of Disgust: Pink Flamingos as Queer Political Cinema." *Screen* 2013; 54 (4): 515.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 517

example of the relational turn in queer theory? Divine and her crew reject empathy, reject the sociocultural hegemony, reject all things good, but in doing so they create their own community that operates in opposition to these norms. This is the same kind of turn I argue happens within the queer underground community – by rejecting the mainstream heteronormative, gender normative, and film normative ideals, these members banded together to create their own community around their shared sensibilities.

Furthermore, not only does *Pink Flamingos* exemplify a ramshackle community formed through rejection within the plot, we can also look at the cult status of the film as another way to build community through the adverse. In 1972, the film was released and screened in the Baltimore Film Festival at the University of Baltimore. The screening drew in crowds of people that already had some interest in John Waters and queer underground film, but also introduced many to the film and the larger community. In a review of the 25th anniversary rerelease of the film, Gus Van Sant recounts the popularity of the film, but also the generational hold it has on the queer community. He writes,

Strutting back into theaters this month, *Pink Flamingos* is poised to give gay audiences a gloriously sick alternative to the thrill of *Star Wars: Special Edition*. Now a generation of gays who have experienced *Pink Flamingos* only on video can finally descend into the total midnight-movie hysteria that carried the film for a 95-week run in New York City and ten consecutive years in Los Angeles.⁸⁷

Van Sant not only draws upon the initial popularity of the film and the cult communities that formed around it, but also the ingrained position it has as a kind of required experience for gays no matter what era they were born into. Additionally, this quote also addresses the culturally subversive aspect of the film by framing it in opposition to the mainstream popularity of *Star Wars*. This reflects that queer community members that were drawn into the lure of John Waters

⁸⁷ Van Sant, Gus (April 15, 1997). "Timeless trash". *The Advocate*. Pg. 40

were not only doing so as a response to mainstream culture and films, but also as a way to find likeminded folks and communities. So, while as Breckon argues, the film does display a connection to antisocial queer theories, when we draw out that comparison and also look at the community formation within the film and surrounding the film, there are also clear connections to the relational turn in queer theory.

Finally, in drawing connections between a queer disgust aesthetic and queer theory traditions of relationality, the work of José Esteban Muñoz can provide deeper imbrication. In *Cruising Utopia*, one of the primary texts of this relational turn within queer theory, Muñoz responds to Bersani and Edelman's antirelational formation of queer theory, advocating instead for a reformation wherein queerness is the horizon – it is a progressive futurity and potentiality that allows us to reject the current paradigm in hope of a different future world. Muñoz calls this future horizon a queer utopia and argues that this queer utopia can be a replacement for anti-relational theories, and instead focus on queerness as collectivity. This aligns once again with the renewed focus on community and building community out of opposition to the present status quo. A key overlap in this text and the queer disgust aesthetic, though, is the shared use of the quotidian. Muñoz draws out queer quotidian moments in the art he analyzes, including Andy Warhol's *Coke Bottle* alongside Frank O'Hara's poem, "Having a Coke with You," arguing that these quotidian moments "signifies a vast lifeworld of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality."⁸⁸ He continues to drop the term "quotidian" throughout the text, eventually noting, "Queer utopia is a modality of critique that speaks to quotidian gestures as laden with potentiality."⁸⁹ In these mentions of the quotidian, Muñoz is consistently making a

⁸⁸ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York, NY: New York University press., 2009. Pg. 6

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 91

case for the quotidian to be a site of community, futurity and potentiality, and for it to be taken up with serious regard. Here, we can distinctly draw back to the quotidian element of the queer disgust aesthetic, and how the pacing of Kuchar's work, alongside the everyday recordings of his life, work to upend the normative shock or rejection response to disgust. In Kuchar's quotidian framing of these moments of bodily disgust, they are potential sites of connection as they work to connect audiences to Kuchar, but also back to their own everyday bodies and disgust. The quotidian, then, not only works to draw out a sense of collectivity in the queer disgust aesthetic, but it also drives a deeper connection to the potentiality of a queer futurity or queer utopia. The queer disgust aesthetic that is present here and within many other queer underground films can function on both sides of the coin – it regrounds the resistance and rejection of normative responses to disgust, filth and queerness, and it also allows for the people who adhere to this resistance to find community amongst others with similar worldviews.

Conclusion

Formulating a queer disgust aesthetic is necessary to correctly address and analyze the use of disgust in queer underground film practices, as well as to understand how people with shared sensibilities can find each other through aesthetics. What has long been overlooked as moments of empty shock, titillation, or humor, requires a much deeper assessment, as it is possible that these moments are included to do more than just relay jolts to our bodies. Furthermore, the work of George Kuchar, while generally regarded well, can also be overlooked and not taken seriously enough in its display of bodily disgust. While it is regularly mentioned in discussions of his work, there has yet to be an in-depth analysis of what the disgust does within his work, and beyond that, within the realm of queer underground film during the 1970s through 1990s. With the use of quotidian, intimate, and unserious representations of disgust, it is now

clear that a queer disgust aesthetic not only exists but has been a long present facet of subversive moving image techniques within the work of queer underground creators. My work here has aimed to lay out and define this aesthetic formation, and through that, address how exactly disgust can be used to entice, to welcome in specific viewers and partakers. And while the queer disgust aesthetic is key here, and it could be drawn out even further in histories of art and literature, what I am most invested in is how this aesthetic can operate as a subversive form of queer underground community building.

There are a plethora of conversations surrounding the community formation of queer groups, like queer kinship and the reformulation of the family unit in the face of estrangement from a biological family, as well as discussions of particular hubs of queer creativity, like NYC in B. Ruby Rich's assessment of New Queer Cinema, etc. And while some of these conversations start to get at how exactly these queer communities form, there is little scholarship that adequately reckons with specific aesthetic moves that work to turn away some while also enticing others. However, the queer disgust aesthetic is specifically invested in viewers that are willing to take seriously the unserious, to find pleasure in the foul, to sit with the content that others would shut off – the queer underground community. And this aesthetic can help carve out an audience of compatriots well-versed in the queer underground and other subversive media formats, like zines.

To return to our queer kissers and the “Not Another Queer Manifesto,” this display of socially taboo and “disgusting” sexual liberation works to awaken something within the queer onlookers, and the queer disgust aesthetic is something that operates the same way. In my experience, Kuchar's work operated very similarly, as it worked to entice me further and further into the world of queer underground film – my own kind of sniffing out the reek, finding a sense

of community in seeing these videos and following their trails. My proposed understanding of the queer disgust aesthetic offers us one clear avenue through which queer underground community members could find each other, wherein the shared fascination with a queer disgust aesthetic built bonds and drew potential members into the fold. The queer disgust aesthetic sparks something, it welcomes connection in the face of everything we are supposed to reject, and if we were to trace the community that it emboldens, there could be a reformulation of what has traditionally been a coastal and urban focus on queer and/or underground communities. In the following two chapters, I will geographically map the locations receptive to queer underground communities that arose within America during and following the boom of the queer underground film movement. By tracing Kuchar's travels and the crossflow of LGBTQ+ zines, what is uncovered is an expansive network of community members and hubs, spanning the 1970s through the early 2000s, that are invested in creating and sharing content that not only reflects a queer disgust aesthetic, but also the sensibilities of the queer underground.

CHAPTER 2:
EXPANDING THE AMERICAN QUEER UNDERGROUND:
REVERBERATIONS WITH GEORGE KUCHAR

Introduction

Scholars of the American underground film movement tend to agree that it began in the late 1950s or early 1960s and ended before the 1970s was over. As previously discussed, Suárez's *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars* lists the time frame as 1961 to 1966, as Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* ushered in the structuralist experimental movement.⁹⁰ Sheldon Renan also lists 1966 as the beginning of the end, noting that many of the underground filmmakers were improving their skills to create "more refined works."⁹¹ David E. James places the beginning of the movement to 1959, but agrees that 1966 marked a shift and while underground films were still being made, the initial explosion had died down.⁹² Furthermore, the primary focal points of this film movement were firmly set in New York City, focused around the Filmmakers Co-op, or San Francisco, with the Canyon Cinema group.⁹³ But, what of the reverberations of the underground, or more specifically queer underground, movement? Could the sentiments and attitude of the queer underground film movement have traveled outwards over time and geographical space? While some filmmakers at the time may have "refined" their skills and shifted to other styles, what of the communities created around these films, around the ideas and energy that the queer underground movement represented? It is the aim of this chapter and Chapter 3 to track some of these reverberations to highlight the importance of these queer underground communities and how the queer underground styles and sentiments migrated across country well into the 2000s.

⁹⁰ Suárez, Juan A. *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996., 55

⁹¹ Renan, Sheldon. *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*. New York, NY: Dutton, 1967., 103.

⁹² James, David E. *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989., 94

⁹³ Renan, Sheldon. *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*. New York, NY: Dutton, 1967., 102.

For the remainder of the chapter, George Kuchar will be the primary focus, and Chapter 2 will take up LGBTQ+ zines to track the reach and reverberations of the queer underground film movement – both over time and geographically throughout America. Kuchar offers a wealth of materials that focus on his travels throughout the United States spanning decades following the initial boom of the queer underground film movement. Looking at the longevity of Kuchar’s career and the multiple places he traveled to visit queer underground peers and to screen his works, allows us to disrupt the focus upon NYC in the 1960s, and instead provides a migration of queer underground styles and sentiments well into the 2000s. Kuchar is also especially helpful in that he was imbricated within the collegiate film community, which rapidly grew during his early career as an educator. As evidenced by AAFF being held at University of Michigan for the first 17 years, as well as the creation of many film programs across the country, the college space was rapidly becoming a repository for queer underground content and thinkers.⁹⁴ J. Hoberman pointed this out in his 1981 article, “Three Myths of Avant-Garde Film,” saying, “The fact is that the partial absorption of the American avant garde into the university has created half a dozen regional centers across the United States.”⁹⁵ These regional centers become all the more visible in tracking Kuchar, and they reinvigorate the community by continuing to inform new generations about the queer underground film movement. By looking at all of these repository sites that are welcoming to queer underground films and their makers, there arises a strong element of community within the queer underground – a kind of linking up with likeminded folks to create safe havens outside of the expected hubs of NYC and SF.

⁹⁴ Alilunas, Peter. “Screen Arts & Culture: A Department History.” About Us. University of Michigan Department of Film, Television, and Media, November 2013.

⁹⁵ Hoberman, J. “Three Myths of Avant-Garde Film.” *Film Comment* 17, no. 3 (1981): 33–35.

However, before mapping out Kuchar's travels, it is necessary to discuss this coastal vs. midwestern or urban vs. rural binary that not only crops up in discussions of the queer underground but has played an important role in the larger LGBTQ+ community and theoretical discussions. This assumptive narrative that progressive communities that accept and celebrate queer sexualities and art can only ever exist in places like NYC or San Francisco is imbricated into much of society and culture, and it takes root in academic discussions as well. To undermine this narrative and reject this concept, queer theory offers an explanation and discussion of these binaries and how the concept of city = safety and community/rural = violence and loneliness have come to fruition.

Beyond the Coasts: Queer Histories

In 1995, Kath Weston's "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration" laid the foundation for the subfield of queer regional or rural studies before it was even named.⁹⁶ Up until this piece, there was a distinct lack of attention paid to rural queer lives or communities. According to Jack Halberstam, "most queer work on community, sexual identity, and gender roles has been based on and in urban populations, and exhibits an active disinterest in the productive potential of nonmetropolitan sexualities, genders, and identities."⁹⁷ While Weston started this discussion in 1995, it didn't really gain a ton of traction until the early years of the 2000s, including Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* in 2005, Scott Herring's *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* in 2010, Karen Tongson's *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* in 2011, and more. This ushered in a more broad understanding of queer livelihoods across urban, suburban and rural spaces, but there still remains a cultural belief that queer people

⁹⁶ Tongson, Karen, and Scott Herring. "THE SEXUAL IMAGINARIUM: A Reappraisal." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 25, no. 1 (January 2019): 51–56. doi:10.1215/10642684-7275292.

⁹⁷ Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. Sexual Cultures. New York University Press, 2005, 34.

primarily exist in the urban, and specifically coastal urban centers, as “inland locations” may be thought to be “‘ten years behind’ cities on the coasts.”⁹⁸

Weston interviewed almost one hundred queer men and women about coming out and moving to San Francisco, coming up with the phrase “the Great Gay Migration” to describe the movement of thousands of queer people to urban areas, specifically San Francisco, in the 1970s and 1980s.⁹⁹ In these coming out narratives, Weston noticed a pattern wherein many of the narratives that came from small town living included a sentiment of “originally believing oneself to be ‘the only one in the world.’”¹⁰⁰ Following this initial thought of complete loneliness, what would often occur was a discovery of what Weston calls the gay, or sexual, imaginary, which she explains as follows “The gay imaginary is not just a dream of a freedom to ‘be gay’ that requires an urban location, but a symbolic space that configures gayness itself by elaborating an opposition between rural and urban life. It is also the odyssey of escape from the isolation of the countryside and the surveillance of small-town life into the freedom and anonymity of the urban landscape.”¹⁰¹ Here, Weston is arguing that this urban/rural binary that is continuously reaffirmed in many of the coming-out stories she studied, is not only representative of the shared imagined space of safety and liberation for queer people, but it is also a narrative process that many queer people have to take in order to find community. It is more so a metaphor for discovery of a community, figured in a spatial and urban/rural dichotomy, wherein the rural is a stand in for a closeted and lonesome space, and the urban is representative of progressivity, freedom and community. She writes, “From the start, then, the gay imaginary is spatialized, just

⁹⁸ Weston, Kath. “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (June 1, 1995): 253–77. doi:10.1215/10642684-2-3-253, 54.

⁹⁹ Tongson, Karen, and Scott Herring. “THE SEXUAL IMAGINARIUM: A Reappraisal.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 25, no. 1 (January 2019): 51–56. doi:10.1215/10642684-7275292.

¹⁰⁰ Weston, Kath. “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (June 1, 1995): 253–77. doi:10.1215/10642684-2-3-253, 33.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

as the nation is territorialized. The result is a sexual geography in which the city represents a beacon of tolerance and gay community, the country a locus of persecution and gay absence.”¹⁰²

Weston argues that an integral part of being queer is this search for a larger community to validate one own sexuality and sexual identity, and so the narrative of leaving a rural space to move to a big city translates very easily to the underlying narrative of feeling alone in one’s sexuality to actively searching out and being validated by a queer community.

A key element to figuring out that there is even this larger community to find is that of access to media beyond the familial space. According to Weston, this included print, television, and other media, which we can connect to the focus here – queer underground film screenings, LGBTQ+ zines, newspapers like *The Village Voice* and more. These kinds of materials and communities that were being written about allow for a rupture in the façade of loneliness for young queer folks who may not see or recognize queerness in their nonurban home space. And considering that much of the content young queer people had access to in this era was limited, a large majority of the representations of queer subjects were within urban settings. This element is something that Jack Halberstam investigates in *In a Queer Time or Place*, focusing in on the stories of Brendon Teena and Matthew Shepard, both victims of horrific hate crimes in rural and midwestern spaces. He writes, “In both cases, the victims became martyrs for urban queer activists fighting for LGBT rights, and they were mythologized in a huge and diverse array of media as extraordinary individuals who fell prey to the violent impulses of homophobic and transphobic middle-America masculinities.”¹⁰³ The few stories of queer people in rural and midwestern spaces became indicators for the entire region, and when those narratives are ones of

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰³ Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place : Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. Sexual Cultures. New York University Press, 2005, 32.

violence, it creates a larger assumption that all rural spaces are either void of queer people, or extremely dangerous spaces for them. So, while access to queer narratives is a prerequisite to discovering a gay imaginary, often these narratives re-entrench notions of precarity in rural and midwestern spaces instead of highlighting “the queer people who live quietly, if not comfortably, in isolated areas or small towns all across North America.”¹⁰⁴ Of course, Weston and Halberstam are aware of the problematics of this kind of broad brushstroke, unnuanced understanding of queer communities in rural and midwestern spaces. Weston notes,

Yet most tales from the Great Gay Migration do not end in the discovery of a bounded community ("my people") after the arduous trek to the urban Promised Land. Instead they culminate in a kind of anti-identification, recounting the experiences of people who arrived in the big city only to conclude, as Scott McFarland did, that "gay people weren't like me much at all." To the extent that individuals were differently positioned within relations of gender, race, age, and class, they entered the urban space of the gay imaginary from very different trajectories. In this respect tales of the Great Gay Migration highlight paradoxes of identity politics with which queer theorists, like the rest of the marginalized, still wrestle.¹⁰⁵

This migration to the urban did not ensure that queer folks would find a perfectly like-minded community, and instead made many members of the community recognize the differences that still arise within the LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, Halberstam writes, “In reality, many queers from rural or small towns move to the city of necessity, and then yearn to leave the urban area and return to their small towns; and many recount complicated stories of love, sex, and community in their small-town lives that belie the closet model.”¹⁰⁶ The rural and midwestern space, then, is in actuality not a landscape devoid of queer lives, but instead has become an easy

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰⁵ Weston, Kath. “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (June 1, 1995): 253–77. doi:10.1215/10642684-2-3-253, 49.

¹⁰⁶ Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place : Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. Sexual Cultures. New York University Press, 2005, 36-7.

stand in for backward ideals and homophobic politics, much like it has in conversations of red vs. blue states in American politics.

The queer underground film movement and consequent reverberations are rife for an analysis beyond the urban and coastal, and it can offer a refined representation of queer underground communities across the country. Instead of focusing on stories of hate crimes and queer death, the mapping here is meant to present a collection of safe havens and queer underground communities that reflect a queer resilience and seeking out of likeminded folks in between the coasts and in the margins outside of the urban space. Furthermore, by looking at Kuchar's cross-country travelogue videos, he provides a perspective of queer rurality that does not align with the popular assumptions about small town and midwestern/southern spaces.

Kuchar's Queer Rurality

As discussed, many LGBTQ+ folks, as well as stories told about LGBTQ+ pain and death, reiterate the idea that rural and inland areas are not necessarily open or welcoming to LGBTQ+ communities. This may be due to lower populations, to regressive social politics, or stemming from popular conceptions of what queerness looks like and where it belongs, but regardless, the association of rural and inland spaces being unsafe for queer and/or LGBTQ+ folks is a resilient one. These associations have also been built into the concept of rurality. In "Coming out and coming back: Rural gay migration and the city" by Alexis Annes and Meredith Redlin, they address the history of theory on rurality and argue that the concept of rurality has been primarily portrayed from a White, Anglo-Saxon perspective, and they assert "that the perspective used to understand rurality was not only White and Anglo, but also heterosexual."¹⁰⁷ This specifically heterosexual, White and Anglo perspective has shaped the concept of rurality,

¹⁰⁷ Annes, Alexis, and Meredith Redlin. "Coming out and Coming Back: Rural Gay Migration and the City." *Journal of Rural Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 2012): 56.

and may have even figured in to the conceptualization of rurality that informs the gay imaginary that Kath Weston discussed. This would certainly fall in line with the arguments made by Weston and Halberstam, but Kuchar's videos can provide us a queer perspective of rural spaces that do not align with the narratives of isolation and violence. Through Kuchar's videos, and specifically his *Weather Diaries*, there is a specifically queer and gay reclamation of rurality in his perspective of Oklahoman landscape and weather.

In the *Weather Diary* videos, Kuchar is visiting El Reno, Oklahoma during the tornado season to witness the weather. El Reno is a small town outside of Oklahoma City (OKC), and even when I visited the town in 2017, it was still quite humble in size, with a great deal of flat, expansive land and wide-open skies. For a tornado enthusiast like Kuchar, it makes sense why he would go to El Reno, both with its proximity to OKC, as well as its cheap prices and more rural setting. For many LGBTQ+ people, the idea of visiting and staying alone in a town like this might spark memories of the brutal murder of Matthew Laramie, or it might invoke anxieties of being called the f-slur, etc. But, in the *Weather Diaries*, Kuchar's focus on the expansive landscapes and weather of Oklahoma, doesn't present a space intrinsically dangerous to him, but instead an open space of disruption and liberation. This isn't to argue that queer and/or LGBTQ+ folks would be safe in El Reno, but to say that nowhere is wholly safe all the time, and that through Kuchar's lens, we can see a version of the inland, rural town that isn't inherently dangerous to his livelihood.



Figure 1: Kuchar's comic "THUNDERCRACK"

Kuchar provides multiple examples of his queer sexuality in the Oklahoma space, and he doesn't seem to hide it or shy away from recording his sexual desires. Before turning to the *Weather Diaries*, first we can look to a short comic strip that Kuchar drew about his experience writing the script for *Thundercrack!*, the porno film that he and Curt McDowell collaborated on (Figure 1). In this comic, Kuchar retells his experience staying at the OKC YMCA for a few days while he wrote the script. While writing, Kuchar would read over his script to a "boy down the hall," but in his drawing, the boy is nude and playing with his genitals while Kuchar reads. The comic ends with the two drawing closer together, but Kuchar drew cartoon flames over the edge to retain some privacy and left a note, "I burned the rest of this strip since it's trashier than

the movie...”¹⁰⁸ Here, Kuchar provides one instance of what seems to be safe and consensual sex between two gay men in Oklahoma, wherein there wasn’t a sense of looming danger just for expressing their sexuality. While it isn’t exactly in a rural space, as the YMCA is in Oklahoma City, it is not a city like NYC or San Francisco, in that they are known to be havens for LGBTQ+ populations. However, like many rural and inland queer and LGBTQ+ folks, Kuchar was able to make connections and find receptive partners while he visited Oklahoma. Kuchar doesn’t shy away from his own sexuality in these spaces, as one might expect. While there are absolutely necessary tactics, like lowering one’s voice, tampering out flamboyancies, dressing more reserved, that gay men make use of when in perceived danger, Kuchar doesn’t record or highlight these moments. Instead, he focuses on the moments of desire. Another example of this desire in El Reno is in *Weather Diary #3*, where Kuchar is walking through town with his camera, and he passes by what seems to be a community pool. He peeks through the fence to watch and briefly record a group of young men that are roughhousing around the pool. Soon after, we see Kuchar masturbate in the shower. This is one of the quotidian moments Kuchar presents, as it feels very ordinary; just a man happening upon young men frolicking in the summer sun and returning home to soothe his heat and his desire. Here, the summery, small-town landscape, offers Kuchar a place to walk around and enjoy his view without harming anyone or enduring harm himself.

Another element of Kuchar’s queer rurality is utilizing the rural space and the Oklahoma weather as representations of his feelings. This occurred in the example with the young men, as Kuchar utilized the heat of the sun to replicate the heat he felt in his desire, and then used his masturbatory shower like how a storm soothes the heat of summer. But *Weather Diary 6* presents

¹⁰⁸ Lampert, Andrew. *The George Kuchar Reader*. New York, NY: Primary Information, 2014, 110.

a longer tethering between Kuchar's sexuality and sexual desire and the tumultuous experience of a tornado. In *Weather Diary 6*, much like *Weather Diary 3*, he is looking for tornadoes in El Reno, Oklahoma. Kuchar spends much of his time watching the sky, waiting for something big to happen above. He also frequently records the weather report on television, consisting of on-the-ground video footage, as well as maps that track the trajectory of the tornado. Kuchar receives a postcard that informs him that his male lover will be arriving in a couple of days. There aren't many details shown, except that because of this knowledge, Kuchar seems very determined to fix his clogged bathtub, which references both his backed up digestive system and his blocked sexual frustrations. This impending visit parallels Kuchar's dedication to the weather, as the TV News shows images of impending destruction, Kuchar shows the date on the bottom corner of the video, marking each day as if in a countdown to his sexual fulfillment. In this video, Kuchar has a reciprocated sexual desire with his visitor and when he finally arrives, so does the crash of the storm. There are flashes of the man in Kuchar's rundown hotel that sync up with the sounds of thunder and claps of lightening; he seems to appear and disappear, jumping from the bedroom to the shower. When Kuchar finds his sexual partner naked in the shower, he turns the camera back on himself, dazed with joy to the point of a face twitch, reminiscent of a cartoon character experiencing reciprocated desire.

In regard to the parallel nature of the two events, the fulfillment of Kuchar's desire can link his sexual frustration and fulfillment to the storm. As the moment of sexual fruition came closer, the storm came closer as well, swirling its way to El Reno. With tornadoes, as the storm builds, a funnel cloud forms, which can mimic the phallic form, and eventually reaches out from the rest of the cloud mass. Then, the funnel cloud can touch down, resulting in a tornado, or it can just eventually pass. In *Weather Diary 6*, Kuchar uses the storm to reflect his own internal

feelings, and there is a consistent interplay between him and the rural landscape. Here, we can see a queer rurality, in that the rural landscape and its weather act as a mirror to what is happening to Kuchar; there is a kind of osmosis between him and the rural space, wherein they pass back and forth feelings and representations of those feelings upon the rural space. Instead of presenting the rural space as a romanticized pastoral vision of land and sky, or as a place of imminent danger for queer and LGBTQ+ lives, Kuchar presents a queer rurality wherein he can and does experience the quotidian and the exciting, with no limits to his sexuality or desire. There is a comfortability in Kuchar when he is visiting El Reno, and his queerness refuses to take a backseat. Through his camera, we can see and conceive of what a queer understanding of rurality could be, and we are able to further disrupt the problematic binary of city = safety and community/rural = violence and loneliness. Kuchar, then, doesn't just offer us an expansive network of queer underground community members, but his videos and his cross-country travels come together to present a vision of the rural that is distinctly different from much of mainstream media. Now, we will turn towards mapping his travels.

Mapping the Queer Underground: George Kuchar's Migration

In this section of the chapter, I want to investigate how the queer underground may have migrated beyond the coasts and NYC following the initial boom in the 1950s and 60s. The primary source for this chapter will be George Kuchar, his video works, and his community network, while Chapter 3 will expand my analysis to LGBTQ+ zines from the 1980s and 1990s. Kuchar offers not only a significant number of queer underground film and video works, but he also has left a trail of breadcrumbs by way of these videos and his writings that can provide a new trajectory of the shockwaves of the queer underground from the mid-1970s through the end of his life in 2011. Kuchar's lifelong trekking provides a kind of blueprint for how the

reverberations of an initial film movement can span decades within interested communities. While the NYC queer underground film movement had a clear moment of popularity and concentrated community in one or two urban centers, NYC and SF, the people and sentiments built up in that movement continued to rattle and ricochet around the United States, influencing queer underground communities well into the 2000s.

For Kuchar, his place in the underground was solidified in NYC in the 1960s, where he and Mike created trash-spectacular narratives that injected the queer underground movement with a taste of the bizarre. It was during this time that George made connections with Andy Warhol, Ken and Flo Jacobs, Jonas Mekas, Jack Smith, and so many others. However, in the early 1970s, George was offered a temporary associate professor position at the San Francisco Art Institute, and this opened up a whole other community:

At the art college I met people from all over the world and utilized their accents in films. As I mentioned before, we made films together in class and when I wasn't in the writing mood we just had students improvise dialogue in their own native language...I also made my own films and used the students I befriended to star in them. They likewise used me. It was an extremely productive time.¹⁰⁹

At this time, George was still using 16mm film, and there was less of an age gap between him and his students, which led to his collaborative and romantic relationship with student and fellow queer underground filmmaker, Curt McDowell. It was McDowell that insured that Kuchar's single year at SFAI turned into a lifelong position. Approaching the end of Kuchar's stay, McDowell devised a petition that suggested hiring Kuchar beyond the initial year, claiming that the school "needed new blood from the outside."¹¹⁰ Soon after, Kuchar was hired on a permanent basis that would last until his death in 2011, only to be taken over by brother Mike. John Waters,

¹⁰⁹ Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997, 32.

¹¹⁰ Stevenson, Jack. *Desperate Visions: The Films of John Waters & the Kuchar Brothers*. (London: Creation Books, 1996.) 177

who wasn't a student, but has consistently noted the Kuchar brothers as significant inspirations, aptly notes, "He has inspired four generations of kids to make movies."¹¹¹ And while not all of George's students went on to be important parts of the underground community, the classroom was a supportive place for hopeful filmmakers to try their hand at underground filmmaking and make connections with other members of the community.

It is also important to recognize that, for Kuchar, the queer underground community did not end in the classroom. When George switched formats from 16mm to video in the 1980's, it started a brand-new category of his film works: his video diaries. With the technological advancement of the handheld video, and its accessibility to home markets, Kuchar was able to make use of this to begin to create film works at a much faster pace. Instead of being careful of how much film stock he was using, he was now able to take the handheld camera wherever he went and record all the highlights and lowlights of his travels across the United States. These video diaries spanned a great deal of content, including his almost yearly trips to El Reno, Oklahoma to experience the tornado season. However, another theme within these video diaries was his cross-country travels throughout the 1980's until the end of his life in 2011. These travels were partially due to his dual living situation, where he and Mike would switch off caring for their mother in the Bronx until she passed in the early 2000's – Mike would be responsible during the school year, and George would return during the summer months to take over the caretaking role. However, there was also a great deal of touring with his films and stopping over to visit many of his previous students and peers in the underground. George wrote about this habit in *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool* saying, "Once you get a full ninety minutes worth of movies to show, it is possible to tour the USA with this package and set up screenings

¹¹¹ Kroot, Jennifer. *It Came from Kuchar*. United States: Tigerlily Films LLC, 2009.

at various universities and film societies. There are some interesting spots to visit.”¹¹² He goes on to list a number of his regular stops, including Chicago, New Orleans, Pittsburgh, and of course, NY – all of which he used as content for his videos.



Figure 2: Kuchar’s comic “Herzog Holiday: The Wonderful Story of a Woman and her Dog” in *Short Order Comix* #2

Kuchar also traveled in circles that extended beyond the queer underground. While they aren’t the main focus of this chapter or the mapping, there are many moments in his videos that highlight these other relationships and communities. One name that arose a handful of times was artist Mimi Gross. Gross is an American painter, set and costume designer, whose work has been displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, The Brooklyn Museum, and more.¹¹³ Kuchar visits Gross a number of occasions, including in 1994 in his video *Tales of the Twilight Typist* (as well as composer, Doug Skinner and writer, Witley Streiber) and 2001 in *Summer Sketch Marks*. Kuchar also had connections with the underground comic community, primarily through well-known comic, Art Spiegelman. Kuchar became

¹¹² Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997., 52

¹¹³ “About Mimi Gross.” Mimi Gross. Accessed February 9, 2023. <http://www.mimigross.com/about-mimi-gross>.

friends with Spiegelman while he was dating Michele Gross-Napolitano, both of whom he cast in one of his early films.¹¹⁴ He also collaborated with Spiegelman and Bill Griffith on a number of comics, including *Short Order Comix* issues #1 and #2, as well as some issues of *Arcade*.¹¹⁵ Figure 2 shows one of the comics Kuchar created that was included in *Short Order Comix* #2.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, in tracking his travels, Kuchar also met up with a number of filmmakers that don't necessarily fall in line with the queer underground, including Guy Maddin in *The Nutrient Express* (2010), Marc Kehoe and Sharon Greytak in *The Flakes of Winter* (1998), and many more. While these parts of Kuchar's network don't align with the scope of the queer underground, it is relevant to mention, as it shows how expansive Kuchar's social circle was. And thinking about how Kuchar talks about the work of his own and his peers, there is a good chance that he met these folks through other queer underground members or integrated them into the community, marginally or otherwise.

George's body of work is beyond extensive, and there is no reliable number of his works, especially when it comes to the video diaries. However, by utilizing many of his videos available at Video Data Bank, as well as their boxset, *The World of Kuchar*, and reading his writings in both *Reflections of a Cinematic Cesspool* and *The George Kuchar Reader*, I began to map out the places that George visited – many of which were both source material for a video, and a visit to a film festival or a fellow underground community member (figure 3). In Figure 3, George's queer underground shows a smattering of places and communities that were welcoming to the kind of content he was making at the time. Many of them correlate with universities that had

¹¹⁴ Kroot, Jennifer. *It Came from Kuchar*. United States: Tigerlily Films LLC, 2009.

¹¹⁵ Fischer, Craig. "Kuchar and Comics." *Fischer On Comix*, March 6, 2012.
<https://fischeroncomix.wordpress.com/2012/03/06/kuchar-and-comics/>.

¹¹⁶ Spiegelman, Art, Willy Murphy, M. McMillan, Joe Schenkman, Jay Kinney, Diane Moomin, R. Hayes, George Kuchar and Bill Griffith. 1974. *Short Order Comix*, Issue #2. SF, CA. Web.

strong and/or burgeoning film programs (Ann Arbor, Madison, Chicago, etc), and some universities that he would guest teach at for a semester (Milwaukee, Santa Fe, South Carolina). While a great deal of his time was spent in the major hubs of NYC and San Francisco, there was never any shortage of travel, including going outside the country to Mexico. In this representation of the queer underground community, the ideals and practices of the queer underground did not stay stuck in one locale, and instead infiltrated and moved across the country. The attention paid to coastal, urban hubs, while important, does overlook some of these repositories for the wayward queer underground folks who did not or could not live in those places, as well as the migration of these ideas across country. And in plotting George's travels, many other figures of the underground showed up, as I will lay out following the map. George's video diaries prove to be a phenomenal account of not only his personal life and self-representation, but also of the innerworkings and spread of the queer underground community.

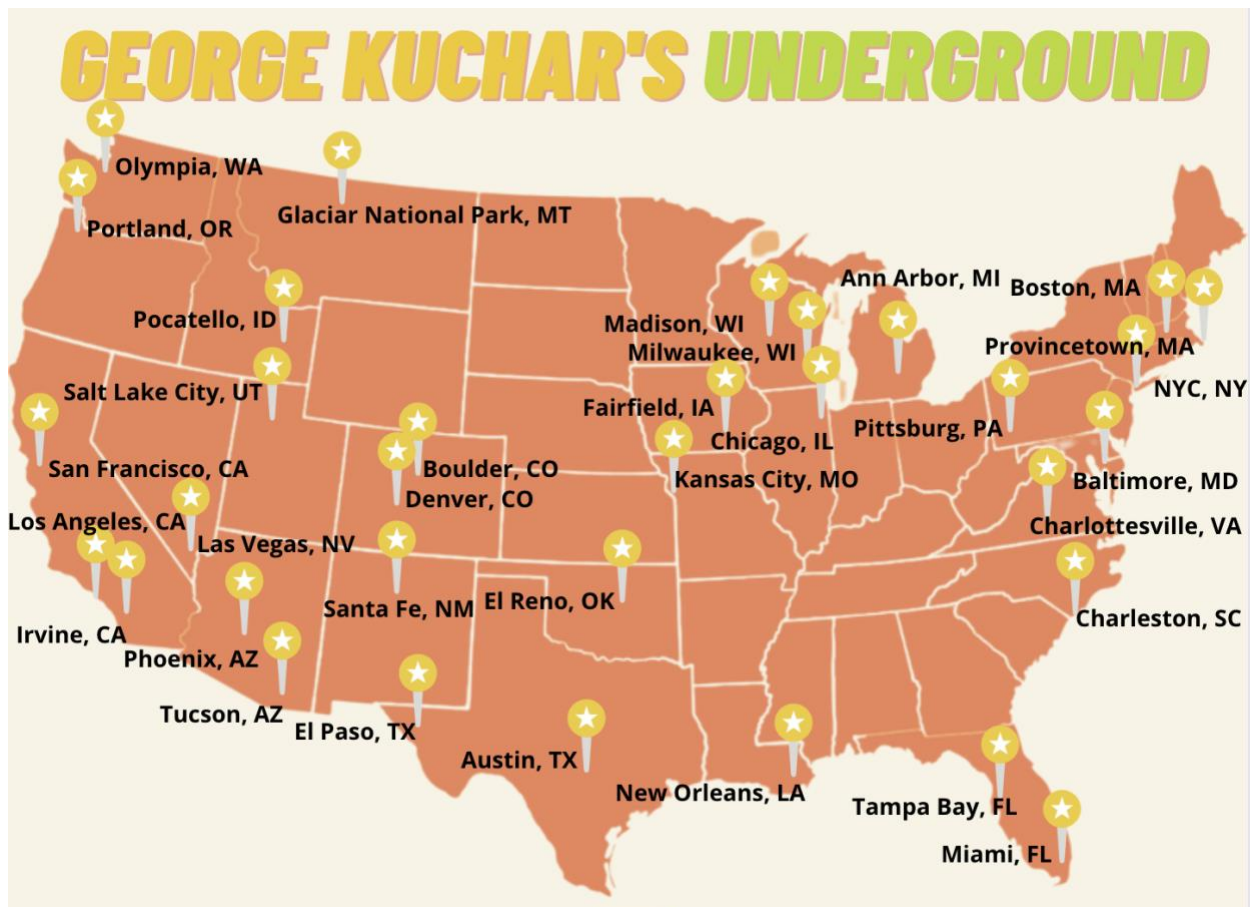


Figure 3: Map and table of places George Kuchar visited to screen or make his queer underground films/videos

City	Video/Film works/Screenings ¹¹⁷
Olympia, WA	<i>The Guzzler of Grizzly Manor</i> (2002) – Olympia Film Festival
Portland, OR	<i>Delectable Destinations</i> (2010)
San Francisco, CA	<i>1980 Seven</i> (1987) <i>The Celluloids</i> (1988)
Los Angeles, CA	<i>L.A. Screening Workshop</i> (1988) <i>Homes for the Holidays</i> (1996) <i>CinemaVille</i> (2007) <i>FlashBulb Alley</i> (2008) – LA Film Festival
Irvine, CA	<i>Delectable Destinations</i> (2010)
Santa Clarita, CA	<i>The Hurt that Fades</i> (1988) – Collaborative student film completed at CalArts over 3 days
San Rafael, CA	<i>Point 'n Shoot</i> (1989)
Yosemite Valley/Mono Lake, CA	<i>Gastronomic Get-Away</i> (1991)
Glacier National Park, MT	<i>Glacier Park Video Views</i> (1993)
Pocatello, ID	<i>Impaction of the Igneous</i> (1992)
Salt Lake City, UT	<i>Impaction of the Igneous</i> (1992)

¹¹⁷ All videos are held at Video Data Bank in Chicago, IL.

Figure 3 (cont'd)

City	Video/Film works/Screenings
Las Vegas, NV	<i>Celebrity Casino</i> (2009)
Phoenix, AZ	<i>Delectable Destinations</i> (2010)
Tucson, AZ	<i>Sunbelt Serenade Part 3: Arizona</i> (1993) <i>Arizona Byways</i> (2001)
Boulder, CO	<i>Greetings from Boulder</i> (1986) <i>We, The Normal</i> (1988)
Denver, CO	<i>Garden of the Goodies</i> (2006)
Santa Fe, NM	<i>Chili Line Stops Here</i> (1989) <i>Dribbles</i> (2010)
El Paso, TX	<i>The Desert Within</i> (1987)
Austin, TX	<i>Jamboree Journey</i> (2009) - SXSW Film Festival in Austin, March 2009 for <i>It Came From Kuchar</i> (Kroot)
El Reno, OK	<i>Weather Diary 1</i> (1986) <i>Weather Diary 2</i> (1987) <i>Weather Diary 3</i> (1988) <i>Weather Diary 4</i> (1988) <i>Weather Diary 5</i> (1989) <i>Weather Diary 6</i> (1990) <i>Chigger Country</i> (1999) <i>Cyclone Alley Ceramics</i> (2000) <i>Centennial</i> (2007) <i>Eye on the Sky</i> (2008)
Madison, WI	<i>500 Millibars to Ecstasy</i> (1989)
Milwaukee, WI	<i>Mecca of the Frigid</i> (1988) <i>Motivation of the Carcasoids</i> (1988) <i>Weather Diary 4</i> (1988)
Chicago, IL	<i>Hefner's Heifers</i> (1989) <i>Say Yes to No</i> (1989) - Collaborative student film completed at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago <i>Vermin of the Vortex</i> (1996) - Flaherty Seminar and the Chicago Underground Film Festival.
Normal, IL	<i>Scarlet Droppings</i> (1991)
Fairfield, IA	<i>Saga of Magda</i> (1990) <i>Come Forth, Julyowa</i> (1991)
Kansas City, MO	<i>Chili Line Stops Here</i> (1989)
City	Video/Film works/Screenings ¹¹⁸
New Orleans, LA	Mentioned in <i>Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool</i> ¹¹⁹
Ann Arbor, MI	<i>Mecca of the Frigid</i> (1988) <i>Ann Arbor</i> (1992) * Visited in 1992 and 1985 for the Ann Arbor Film Festival ¹²⁰
Boston, MA	<i>1980 Seven</i> (1987) <i>East By Southwest</i> (1987) <i>Zealots of Zinc Zone</i> (2010) – Visits Harvard Film Archive, Anthology Film Archives

¹¹⁸ All videos are held at Video Data Bank in Chicago, IL.

¹¹⁹ Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. 52.

¹²⁰ Mitchell, Harmen. "Kuchar's 'The Xtras' Highlight of Weekend Avant-Garde Film Slate." *Ann Arbor News*, September 20, 1985; "Hold Me While I'm Naked." *50th Ann Arbor Film Festival Program*, March 27, 2012., 90

Figure 3 (cont'd)

City	Video/Film works/Screenings
Provincetown, MA	<i>The Celtic Crevasse</i> (2002) <i>Burnout</i> (2003) <i>I, of the Cyclops</i> (2006) – Meets with John Waters <i>Nibbles</i> (2009) <i>Webtide</i> (2010)
Connecticut	<i>The Flakes of Winter</i> (1998)
NYC, NY	<i>Creeping Crimson</i> (1987) <i>Cult of the Cubicles</i> (1987) <i>Tempest in a Tea Pot</i> (1990) Award (1992) – 1992 Maya Deren Awards for Independent Film and Video Artists from the American Film Institute <i>Tales of the Twilight Typist</i> (1994) <i>The Exiled Files of Eddie Gray</i> (1997) <i>The Flakes of Winter</i> (1998) <i>Metropolitan Monologues</i> (2000) <i>Summer Sketch Marks</i> (2001) <i>The Celtic Crevasse</i> (2002) <i>Holiday Hang Ups</i> (2006) <i>The Butchered Beefcake</i> (2011) – Visiting for the Volta Art Show where some of his art was on display
Fisher's Island, NY	<i>Currents of Destiny</i> (2007)
Purchase, NY	<i>East By Southwest</i> (1987)
Annendale-on-the-Hudson, NY	<i>The Unclean</i> (1995) – collaborative project with students from Bard College
New Jersey	<i>The Redhead from Riverside Terrace</i> (1991) <i>I, of the Cyclops</i> (2006)
Pittsburgh, PA	<i>Dream Boat</i> (2004)
Baltimore, MD	<i>The Towering Icon</i> (1998) – attending the premier of <i>Divine Trash</i> , a documentary on John Waters <i>Aquatica</i> (2000)
Charlottesville, VA	<i>Atrium of the Omni-Orb</i> (2008) – 2008 Virginia Film Festival ¹²¹
Charleston, SC	<i>The Confessions of Nina Noir</i> (1995)
Tampa Bay, FL	<i>Terror by Twilight</i> (1988) – led a one-day video workshop <i>Munchies of Melody Manor</i> (1990)
Miami, FL	<i>Art Space</i> (2009) – 2009 Miami Scope Art Festival ¹²²
City	Video/Film works/Screenings ¹²³
Non-US Travels	Video/Film works/Screenings
Winnipeg, Canada	<i>The Nutrient Express</i> (2010) – Meets with Guy Maddin and attends WNDX Film/Video Festival
Acapulco, Mexico	<i>Burrito Bay</i> (2009)

¹²¹ Kelly, John. "Virginia Film Festival Begins Oct. 30." UVA Today. University of Virginia, June 19, 2012. <https://news.virginia.edu/content/virginia-film-festival-begins-oct-30>.

¹²² "SCOPE Art Show - Miami 2009." e-flux.com. SCOPE Art Show, November 24, 2009. <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/37452/art-show/>.

¹²³ All videos are held at Video Data Bank in Chicago, IL.

Kuchar's video works are so expansive, and oftentimes one video will cover a number of travels, as his videos worked as travelogues at times. Throughout the twenty-odd years that Kuchar was making videos, he highlights a few people that he is meeting up with. Some of them are virtually unknown, whether it be previous students or people he roped into acting for his early films, and then others are certifiable underground celebrities. To expand upon the integral element of community within the queer underground, the remainder of the chapter is focused on tracing out some of the networks Kuchar built over his career. Beginning with his early days where he worked with neighborhood and high school friends, to his introduction to and inclusion within the NYC queer underground film movement where he built relationships with other filmmakers, to his role as an educator and his attendance at a variety of university film screenings, this map and Kuchar's travels present a much more elaborate spread of queer underground films and sentiments across the country, as well as a specific attunement to community.

Kuchar's Community: The Early Days

The benefit of taking up Kuchar as a starting point for mapping out the queer underground is that he routinely visits many members of his community, spanning all the way back to his early days as a filmmaker. These visits represent the importance of community to Kuchar and to his filmmaking styles, as these figures often showed up in his videos. Growing up in The Bronx, George and Mike Kuchar were reliant on the people in their immediate surroundings who were willing to take part in their films, whether it be playing a main role or providing clothes or props. They had to make the most out of what was available to them, even going so far as to skip school to film on their roof during the day when the sun was the most

optimal for filming.¹²⁴ This meant that the early films included a rag-tag collection of non-professional and amateur actors that were plucked from The Bronx scenery. Included in this cohort were some folks who weren't mainstays in Kuchar's films and videos, like Howard Selitz (*The Slasher*, 1958), James Brawley (*The Slasher* and *The Thief and the Stripper*, 1959), Mary Flanagan (*Green Desire*, 1966, *Corruption of the Damned*, 1965, *Lovers of Eternity*, 1964), and Barbara Newman (*The Thief and the Stripper*, *Night of the Bomb*, 1962, *The Mammal Palace*, 1968). Another temporary member of the group was Tony Reynolds (*The Mammal Palace*, *Night of the Bomb*, *The Naked and the Nude*, 1957), who went on to join the musical group Odyssey, who had one big hit "Native New Yorker."¹²⁵ However, there were a few members that became very close friends of George and continued to make appearances in his films and videos, including Larry Leibowitz and his mother, Frances, and Donna Kerness. These were the people that became significant figures in his filmmaking and helped usher him into the NYC underground community.

While virtually unknown and unmentioned within the larger underground community, Larry Leibowitz and his mother Frances were key figures in Kuchar's early career. During the early 1960s, Kuchar found in Larry a peer in lowbrow film culture, and they would continue to talk shop throughout his life. Kuchar writes, "My best friend in those days was Larry Leibowitz, a young Jewish man who was obsessed with cannibalism and bodily mutilations. I'd walk over to his house to view artificial decapitated limbs and grimacing skulls still in possession of their eyeballs. His mother, Frances Leibowitz, would make us hot Ovaltine."¹²⁶ While Frances primarily offered the space and sustenance for the two to chat about film and plan different

¹²⁴ Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. 20.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

elements, she also took part in the filmmaking in a few occasions. She can be seen in *Encyclopedia of the Blessed* (1968) and *Mosholu Holiday* (1967), as well as taking prominence in a portrait that George painted of her and Larry (Figure 4). Frances was more so in the background, while Larry took a center stage role in Kuchar's early films. Larry starred in several his films in the 60s, including *Night of the Bomb* (1962), *Confessions of Babette* (1963), *Lust for Ecstasy* (1964), *A Town Called Tempest* (1963), *Corruption of the Damned* (1966), *Eclipse of the Sun Virgin* (1967) and a handful more. He is also featured in many of Kuchar's video diaries when he visits NYC, including *Cult of the Cubicles* (1987), *The Creeping Crimson* (1987) and *Metropolitan Monologues* (2000). In many of the instances that Kuchar traveled back home to the Bronx, he would visit and record some of his conversations with Larry, which always included chatting about films, even if Kuchar was more so steeped in an independent or underground film knowledge, and Larry was more invested in lowbrow, B-movies.



Figure 4: Portrait of Fran and Larry Leibowitz, painted by George Kuchar

In Kuchar's video, *Award* (1992) he wins the American Film Institute's Maya Deren Award for Independent Film and Video Artists. This short video is representative of the type of interactions Kuchar has with the various groups he is a part of. Three separate film communities that Kuchar was instrumental in are presented: his NYC filming buddies who would act in his

early films, the larger independent/underground film community, and the SFAI or collegiate classroom community. In the final half of the video, Kuchar records himself after the event is over, when he invites Larry to come over to check out the award. There is another man present, Jimmy, and all three of them begin discussing Kuchar's award, how much they think the Tiffany & Co. statue costs to make, and more. When Kuchar tells them the name of the award, he goes on to say "Maya Deren is a redhead, she made pictures," to explain who she is. It is clear that Larry and his friend do not know who Deren is, and Kuchar provides basic information – she is a woman, a redhead, she made pictures, she was into voodoo, she is dead, etc. The conversation here is more like a generic friendly conversation between film enthusiasts, where Viveca Lindfors gets the most traction, as they talk about her film *Cauldron of Blood* (1970) and short inserts from the film are included throughout the conversations. The remainder of the short includes another celebration in Brooklyn with more of his NYC friends and peers, as well as multiple inserts of Lindfors' scenes from her films, before ending with a thank you note to AFI and Maya Deren. Including these interactions and conversations in the video show the breadth of the underground community by way of Kuchar, as well as the longlasting relationships that came out of the early days of his career. Even if Larry isn't a key figure in the queer underground, he is emblematic of some of the tangential players within the movement that primarily act or perform supporting labor. Without these kinds of members, there is no telling how the queer underground would have looked or came to fruition, and by continuing to include Larry and others in his videos, Kuchar is, in some ways, reminding viewers of those important but forgotten supporters of queer underground filmmaking.

Another member that Kuchar continued to keep up with and record was Donna Kerness. Donna went to high school with George and Mike, and she "became our [their] 8mm film

star.”¹²⁷ She was primarily trained in dancing, but she also was a poet and an actress, and beyond that, she provided access to her parents Brooklyn apartment, which was regularly used for filming. She primarily was cast because she was willing and a friend, but Kuchar also cast her because she fit many of the ideals of what a woman on screen would look like for him. In a biography he wrote for her, he says “Although gifted with bodily movements below the waist, which led to a stint with an avant garde dance company, the jiggle exhibited by another top heavy element of her physique caused great excitement to the movie going public.”¹²⁸ Her “mammalian charisma,” as he termed it, led to her starring in a number of Kuchar’s early films, including *A Tub Named Desire* (1956), *Pussy on a Hot Tin Roof* (1961), *Hold Me While I’m Naked* (1966), *Pagan Rhapsody* (1970), and more. Furthermore, she brought in some other people who would help, including her then-husband, Hopeton Morris, who not only joined her in acting in *Hold Me While I’m Naked*, but he also designed and provided Donna’s wardrobe for the film.¹²⁹ Donna became a lifelong friend for George, as they exchanged letters and emails throughout their lives. In Lampert’s *The George Kuchar Reader*, there is a large selection of these letters reprinted, spanning all the way from right after their high school graduation in 1960, to the end of his life with a final email on August 30th, 2011, about a week before he died. In the 1990s, the two reunited for a few films as well, including *Sherman Acres* (1992), *Urchins of Ungawa* (1994) and *Secrets of the Shadow World* (1999). She rarely made appearances as herself in Kuchar’s videos, but she was instrumental in his early career. Later in life, she moved to Texas, and took part in Kroot’s documentary, *It Came From Kuchar*. While none of Kuchar’s videos in Texas show him visiting Donna, she can still provide a plot point outside of the coasts

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹²⁸ Lampert, Andrew. *The George Kuchar Reader*. New York, NY: Primary Information, 2014, 263.

¹²⁹ Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. 21.

as one of the members of the queer underground that migrated elsewhere. Kerness was also in a few other underground films, including a few titles by Jane Elford, *Magicman* (1975), *Seadrift* (1976); a handful from Bob Cowan, *River Windows* (1966), *Rockflow* (1968), *Jangleflex* (1968); a film from Joyce Wieland, *Bill's Hat* (1967); as well as one of Jack Smith's films, *No President* (1969). She took up a pivotal role in George's life, not only offering a lifelong friendship and collaborative relationship, but also by introducing George to the world of underground film by way of Bob Cowan. George writes,

Donna Kerness enjoyed making the 8mm movies with us and told us that we should meet the man who was taking still-photos of her. She took us to a Brooklyn Heights pad and we met a Canadian gentleman, Robert Cowan (we called him Bob...Blob whenever we were angry at him)...Bob Cowan was about ten years older than us, a man from the bohemian world of the frozen north, having come to the United States with the likes of Mike Snow and his then wife, Joyce Weiland.¹³⁰

This was the connection the Kuchar brothers needed to find the booming underground film community at the time, but without Donna that connection may not have ever been made.

Kuchar's Community: Underground Cohorts

The connections George and Mike made in the early days of their career are the seeds for a much larger network that grew over the next few decades. In uncovering these initial seeds and tracing out the network, I argue that community networks were integral to the growth and resilience of the queer underground film movement. The first thread of connection was through friends like Donna Kerness, and she led the Kuchars further into the queer underground through her relationship with Bob Cowan. Bob Cowan serves as the Kuchar brothers' initial introduction to the NYC underground film boom. Cowan was an unsung member of the underground as well, making films like *The Child* (1962), *Rockflow* (1968), *Earth Song* (1970) and more. He also acted in a number of underground films, like Kuchar's *Pussy on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Color Me*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

Shameless (1967), as well as a number of Mike's films including *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1965), Ken Jacobs' *The Sky Socialist* (1965), etc. Cowan also served as a projectionist for a number of screenings. In an obituary written by Jack Stevenson, he notes:

None of his film work provided Bob with much of a living, and he was compelled to toil as a projectionist and light man to pay the rent. He worked various stints here and there, but his main gig was at the Cinematheque, the screening space for the NY Filmmakers Co-op. It changed locations at regular intervals, and Bob projected at all of them over the course of most of its existence.¹³¹

Cowan was one of the figures that primarily existed in the margins, but was instrumental in keeping screenings going, and eventually he even served on the board for the Filmmakers' Coop.¹³² As previously mentioned, Cowan was introduced to the Kuchar brothers by Donna Kerness, and he shared all his knowledge and connections with the twins. Kuchar writes, "I saw a lot of underground movies because of Bob Cowan. He was very familiar with the alternative art scene in New York at the time and was an avid reader of the *Village Voice* newspaper."¹³³ Cowan is the one that first told the brothers about Ken and Flo Jacobs and how they held screenings in their lower Manhattan loft, and eventually introduced them to Ken and Flo. This was where the Kuchar brothers began screening their own films.

These early moments opened up a new world for the brothers and led to a long series of introductions to many of the key members of the NYC queer underground. Kuchar reflects on this time, writing:

These new artists seemed footloose and fancy-free. We were exposed to their works and sometimes invited into their homes to see how they had baked raw footage in ovens to make the film emulsion crack into an abstraction of animated forms. Others applied dyes to clear film leader or collected dead moths, using their wings as fodder for film and taping the remains directly onto the stock they were using. It was a world of feverish activity performed in poverty, a grab-bag of grungy gurus and eclectic elitists-bohemians

¹³¹ Stevenson, J. (2012, January 31). *Robert Cowan (1930-2011): Unsung Superstar of the Underground*. Bright Lights Film Journal. Retrieved February 8, 2023

¹³² *Robert Cowan - the film-makers' cooperative*. Robert Cowan - The Film-Makers' Cooperative. (n.d.).

¹³³ Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. 22.

bathed in beatific benevolence of rat-like frenzies of frustrated fury. It was a very alive place full of promise and perverts that made room for me and my brother and our burden of canned dreams.¹³⁴

Here, Kuchar is clearly referencing Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963) and potentially, Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1967) wherein she painted, etched, and baked the filmstrip.¹³⁵ While there weren't any mentions of Schneemann beyond this reference, Kuchar and Brakhage became fairly friendly during the time, leading to a more enduring friendship. Long after Brakhage left the NYC scene, he was teaching at University of Colorado, Boulder. In 1988, Kuchar paid Brakhage a visit and stayed with him and his wife Jane. During the visit, Kuchar filmed *We, The Normal*, showing some of the Colorado scenery and snippets of a party that both he and Brakhage attended.¹³⁶ This connection to Brakhage eventually led to another friendship with super-8 underground filmmaker Willie Varela. Varela worked closely with Stan Brakhage early in his career and went on to make over 100 underground films and videos from a specifically Chicano perspective.¹³⁷ In 1987, Kuchar traveled down to El Paso, TX to visit Varela, as shown in *The Desert Within* (1987). Many of the friendships and acquaintanceships formed during this time were limited to the NYC sphere, but they show how Kuchar was building a network of peers and a community of likeminded creators. Kuchar writes of many of these big names in his chapter "Underground Rumbblings" in the co-authored *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*, and his many interactions.

In their early filmmaking and screening days, the Kuchar brothers were introduced to Jonas Mekas by Ken Jacobs following one of the screenings in his apartment. These screenings

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹³⁵ McDonald, Scott. *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place*. Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 2010, 62.

¹³⁶ Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. 27.

¹³⁷ Juarez, Miguel. "An Interview with Filmmaker Willie Varela." Medium. Medium, January 14, 2018.

are what Mekas would usually report on in his column in the *Village Voice* – which seemed to turn folks like Bob Cowan and John Waters onto the world of underground cinema.¹³⁸ Kuchar paints Mekas as this kind of godfather figure, standing in the back of screenings as an intimidating presence. He writes about their first meeting and how it led to their underground fame:

Jonas Mekas was in the shadows, his physical dimensions dwarfed by the walls and ceiling, yet his powerful presence could be sensed by the way occupants kept their distance from his corduroy-clad persona. We shook his hand and he smiled with a trickster-like grin that hinted at shyness with a good dollop of mischief. Not long afterward a review of our show appeared in his weekly column – a rave review. Suddenly Mike and I were part of the burgeoning underground movie moment, our 8mm productions attracting a whole range of artistically bent New Yorkers...¹³⁹

This connection to Jonas Mekas is what catapulted the Kuchar brothers to fame within the queer underground. Meeting Mekas and having him review their film led to a much larger network, as Mekas would publish this review for many interested community members to see. This meant that the Kuchar brothers now had a sense of notoriety within the queer underground film community, and it led to them being included in screenings, being invited to collaborate and more.

This Mekas review that Kuchar mentions was the first real and public inclusion within the queer underground community, and it eventually drew in John Waters, who would go on to become a good friend and fan of the Kuchar brothers. According to Waters, as a youth he would read the *Village Voice* and Mekas' column, which led him into the city to see the films for himself. This was the spark that lit up Waters' own creative juices, leading him to go straight home to Baltimore, to believe in his own "tawdry visions" and cast his friends, one of whom he renamed "Divine," and to begin his first real "trash epic," *Roman Candles* (1966). He was deeply

¹³⁸ Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997., ii.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

inspired, writing, “Here were directors I could idolize – complete crackpots without an ounce of pretension, outsiders to even ‘underground’ sensibilities who made exactly the films they wanted to make without any money, starring their friends.”¹⁴⁰ While Waters’ fame eventually surpassed the Kuchar’s, he continued to cite them as a significant influence to his work, and he also provided an interview for *It Came From Kuchar*. Oftentimes, Kuchar would swing by to visit with Waters when he was on the east coast. In 1998, Kuchar attended the premier for *Divine Trash*, a documentary on John Waters. In *The Towering Icon* (1998), Kuchar recounts the event and being able to meet Divine’s mother in Baltimore. He also meets up with John Waters for a lunch while visiting Provincetown, MA in 2006, as evidenced by *I, of the Cyclops* (2006). Finally, another underground director that Kuchar met up with over the years was Bruce Conner. Conner created films like *A Movie* (1958), *Cosmic Ray* (1961), *Crossroads* (1976) and more. In his initial meeting with Conner, Bruce asked Kuchar if he would be interested in filming a surgical procedure he would be undergoing, which at first did not sound appealing to Kuchar. Instead, he eventually made *Tempest in a Tea Pot* in Conners New York home in 1990.

Kuchar made many other connections during the height of the NYC underground, some of which are the most notable names from the movement. He writes about meeting Andy Warhol a few times, as well as meeting some of Warhol’s key talents and cohort, including Edie Sedgwick, Viva, and he even went to school with Gerard Malanga, who starred in a few of Warhol’s films. He was first introduced to Warhol through his friendship with Jack Smith, who took Kuchar to the warehouse that Warhol was filming and making silkscreens out of. At the time, Smith was acting in one of Warhol’s films, and Kuchar tagged along to discuss one of the filming sessions that Smith was unhappy with.¹⁴¹ Jack Smith had already worked with Kuchar at

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, ii.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

this point, as he was a neighbor of Don Lederberg who was acting in one of Kuchar's films. Since Smith was so close by, he would fill in for some roles, and would even improvise scenes. Kuchar writes, "Jack Smith was a gold mine of sudden bursts of inspiration and in one scene, where he was to empty the contents of a beer bottle onto Donna Kerness, he decided to fling the whole bottle at her for more dramatic effect. The effect certainly achieved its goal. Luckily she ducked the unscripted bit of business. Jack Smith was truly a hair-and-hackle-raising talent to reckon with."¹⁴²

Beyond Smith and Warhol, Kuchar also has stories to tell about Ron Rice, director of *The Flower Thief* (1960), *Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (1963), and Gregory Markopoulos, as Markopoulos took portraits of Mike Kuchar and visited their home in the Bronx, where the twins welcomed him with coffee cake and beverages.¹⁴³ Another member of the underground that Kuchar got to know was Robert Nelson, who was an experimental and underground filmmaker and artist, very active in San Francisco, who created films like *Plastic Haircut* (1963) and *Oh Dem Watermelons* (1965) before moving on to teach filmmaking at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.¹⁴⁴ In 1988, Kuchar visited Robert Nelson in Milwaukee, as shown in *Mecca of the Frigid* (1988). Kuchar was also hired to complete a month-long video workshop at the university during this time, *Motivation of the Carcasoids* (1988). Furthermore, Kuchar had an unplanned meeting with Kenneth Anger after he noticed him crying in a restaurant; Kuchar writes, "I questioned whether it would be wise to introduce myself and say hello, deciding that maybe this diversion might be the temporary relief he needed at the moment. It worked. The legendary filmmaker talked shop with me for a few minutes and the cloud of misery dispersed in that house

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Weber, Bruce. "Robert Nelson, Experimental Filmmaker, Dies at 81." *New York Times*. January 21, 2012.

of hotcakes.”¹⁴⁵ These moments of connection, whether one-time events or the first of many, present the queer underground as a network of interconnections and collaboration. Kuchar made these connections when he could and often followed up if it was possible.

This network of connections is vast and varied, but we can see that Kuchar rubbed shoulders with some of the most popular names from the queer underground film movement. These people not only worked together, watched films together, and had similar criticisms about mainstream film, but they also represent the strong community element of the queer underground film movement. These people were responding to each other, to their film works, and having conversations through their art, building up a community that would go on to spread the sentiments to others. Here, Kuchar shows how interwoven the community was in the initial boom of the queer underground film movements, and how those connections spawned even more community through mentees like Willie Warela, as well as through shared actors and actresses, like Donna Kerness and George Malanga.

Kuchar's Community: Classroom Companions

After moving to San Francisco to teach at the San Francisco Art Institute, Kuchar opened himself up to a whole other community of creators. As educator, Kuchar's relationships often took on an informative tone. In *Award*, the SFAI classroom community, is minimally discussed, but frames the whole video. To open the short video, Kuchar is sitting in front of his camera, with saxophone music playing in the background. The image has a blurred effect around the edges, and in Kuchar fashion, he begins by belching before addressing his class to inform them that he will not be able to attend their next class session because he will be attending the award ceremony in NYC. While we don't see the classroom or any of his students, this introduction

¹⁴⁵ Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. 28.

centers his role as an educator and his duties to the class. His tone and demeanor are more professional than usual (including the belch), and he speaks very clearly for the recording. When discussing the award, he even holds the invitation up to the camera for his students to get a look. In the award brochure, we are able to see that The Vasulkas and Marlon T. Riggs are also being honored that year, as Kuchar continues to explain his absence from the class. This version of Kuchar is still rough around the edges, but his presentation of the information is thorough and clear, very much in the vein of relating facts and key information for a group of students.

Kuchar was able to present himself as both educator and friend, and in the early years when Kuchar was still quite young himself, sometimes the boundaries of the student-teacher relationship were blurred. The primary example of this was filmmaker Curt McDowell, who was a member of the queer underground with films like *Thundercrack!* (1974), *Confessions* (1972), *Loads* (1985), and more. Their relationship went beyond friendship and they were lovers for some time in the 1970s, but they also collaborated on projects – mainly *Thundercrack!*, as Kuchar wrote the script and McDowell directed. The two didn't remain lovers for long, but their friendship lasted well into the 1980s and only ended when McDowell died of AIDS-related illness. In *Video Album 5: The Thursday People* (1987), Kuchar creates a kind of homage to Curt McDowell while he is dying from AIDS complications, showing the 9th annual SFAI film festival that was dedicated in honor of McDowell. There are countless interactions like these throughout Kuchar's videos, and he also meets with many of his friends and students from San Francisco Art Institute, including visiting David Hallinger in *The Inmate* (1997), as well as James Oseland, who eventually became a writer, editor and a judge on *Top Chef*, in *Metropolitan Monologues* (2000), etc. Furthermore, students like Christopher Coppola and Jennifer Kroot have continued to celebrate George's legacy. Kroot created *It Came From*

Kuchar, which documents the Kuchar brothers' careers and includes interviews with many of the people that the Kuchar's influenced, including Coppola. Coppola not only teaches at SFAI now, but he also widened Kuchar's circle by introducing him to a number of his family members, including Nicolas Cage, and stars like Charlie Sheen.¹⁴⁶

He also traveled often to teach at other universities, making connections with folks throughout the country. Through his connection to Robert Nelson, Kuchar was hired for a month-long video workshop at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, which resulted in his film *Motivation of the Carcasoids* (1988). He visited Chicago a number of times, making *Say Yes to No* in 1989 with students from the School of the Art Institute, and then *Vermin of the Vortex* while attending the Flaherty Seminar and the Chicago Underground film festival in 1996. Kuchar was also hired to do a one-day workshop in Tampa Bay, Florida, resulting in *Terror by Twilight* (1988). In the same year, Kuchar visited CalArts in San Clarita, CA to work with students for a 3-day workshop, wherein they made *The Hurt that Fades* (1988). Then, in 1995, he worked with students at Bard College in Annendale-on-the-Hudson in New York, creating *The Unclean* (1995). In each of these workshops, Kuchar built a larger network, reaching out to folks who probably didn't have any connection to the NYC queer underground, but who were inspired by the work and characteristics created in that time. Chapter 4 will explore Kuchar's role as educator more in depth, but here we can see that a significant part of Kuchar's network was born out of the classroom and his position as an educator.

In these sections, we have gotten to see Kuchar in three different modes for his varied communities that have all come out of the queer underground film movement; his role as an educator and his classroom community, his position as a filmmaker within a larger community of

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 95-101.

filmmakers, and his community from his youth that helped him make the films that started off this whole trajectory. These interactions are just a few of the examples from Kuchar's videos, and it is important to mention that there are many people he records meeting that he only names by their first name, so there are probably countless more people that he met that were minor members of the queer underground. However, what we can take away from this analysis of Kuchar's network is that the queer underground film movement thrived because of the invested community members that collaborated and conversed with each other to create new and different film works. And beyond that, the spread of the queer underground film movement expanded this network beyond the urban coasts by way of traveling filmmakers who brought the characteristics of the queer underground with them wherever they went.

Conclusion

With the handheld camera, Kuchar was able to film all these interactions and moments with folks from all arenas of his life, and provide a long form record of how long lasting the relationships in and around the queer underground film community could be. His travels throughout the 1980s to 2011 show that the queer underground community became vast and varied throughout the United States and the film movement created reverberations that lasted for decades. Popular conceptions of rural and inland spaces reflect a lack of queer and LGBTQ+ communities, and scholars like Kath Weston and Jack Halberstam have shown how, within these communities, there is a shared imaginary of another space of acceptance and queer love – the city. However, as Weston noted, “most tales from the Great Gay Migration do not end in the discovery of a bounded community.”¹⁴⁷ Moving to the city will not solve the problem of lack of community, but instead, Kuchar shows us that by finding your way into a more niche queer

¹⁴⁷ Weston, Kath. “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (June 1, 1995): 253–77. doi:10.1215/10642684-2-3-253, 49.

community (the queer underground film community), you can find and make relationships across the country in rural, inland, coastal, and urban spaces.

This chapter argues that the queer underground film movement was deeply reliant upon the queer underground community it drew from, and that through these community members like Kuchar, a much larger, cross-country network was created over the decades following, through college institutions and classrooms, through underground film screenings, through mentorship relationships, and more. Kuchar is a relevant figure in this argument in that he kept up relationships and friendships from his early days in the queer underground film boom in NYC through his days teaching in SFAI. Unlike much of the scholarship that defined the underground film movement as a movement that ended in the 1960s, by carving out a taxonomy reflective of the specificities of the queer underground film movement, I have argued that community and collaboration is an integral characteristic, and through exploring that characteristic, we can see that the queer underground film movement had a much longer afterlife by way of its reverberations throughout the country. While other scholars have taken regional and geographical approaches to underground and avant-garde film movements, the work in the chapter expands upon those approaches to track how the network was built up across the country through the 1970s, 80s, 90s, and up through the early 2000s. In tracing Kuchar's network, I have unveiled an expansive community that was invested in queer underground film and the sensibilities that came with it well beyond the traditional time period of the 50s and 60s.

This queer underground community expanded beyond just filmmakers, as I showed here with some of the key actors in Kuchar and other filmmakers works, as well as folks like Bob Cowan, who also ran the projector for multiple underground film screenings. Throughout time, the queer underground community included more than just the filmmakers and actors, but also

the folks who worked behind the scenes, students and audience members who were invested in the films and sentiments of the movement, people that organized screenings, and more. These members of the community can be somewhat difficult to trace, but in the next chapter, I will utilize LGBTQ+ zines to reflect the voices the larger community. These zines are representative of the queer underground community, a community that always informed the film movement, and traces the community through the 80s and 90s, and offer us a larger scope beyond filmmakers like Kuchar. In exploring the community further through LGBTQ+ zines, we can see just how influential the queer underground film movement was upon the larger surrounding community, and how the community spread and applied these characteristics and sensibilities beyond the urban coasts through the AIDS epidemic and the continued attack on queer and LGBTQ+ art.

CHAPTER 3:
MESSAGES OF QUEER UNDERGROUND REBELLION:
LGBTQ+ ZINES IN AMERICA

Introduction

On what would have been Jack Smith's 62nd birthday, November 14, 1994, zinester Charles Nash performed his second rendition of "Anyone can step into the costume," a performance art piece wherein Nash strips out of his "street clothes," puts on a costume of found and purchased "Egyptian attire," and tells stories about Jack Smith from the glory days of the queer underground film movement in NYC.¹⁴⁸ Nash, a gay artist and activist, native of Lansing, Michigan, chronicles his visit to NYC for his performance, the days leading up to and following this performance in his single-shot zine, *Montgomery Clift Was Queer*, including his process of creation, visiting people who knew Jack, his old apartments, haunts, and more.¹⁴⁹ This performance, and Nash's retelling within the zine is a perfect example to highlight the long-lasting influence the queer underground film movement had on queer underground community members and how these queer underground figures and stories became a touchstone for connection amongst the members. Despite dying in 1989, Jack Smith and his work spoke to generations of queer underground community members, and Nash, his performance, and zines are proof of that. Furthermore, beyond creating inspiration that lasted for decades, Nash's zine shows how these performances furthered the growth of the community by creating connections with other invested folks, but also by introducing new people to the alluring magic of Jack Smith and the NYC queer underground. When discussing the rehearsal process, Nash wrote:

I had 2nd thots[sic] about doing 'Anyone can...' Plus thinks kept going wrong: one of the ties fell off my skirt, I couldn't do up the catch of the bracelet, one ring wouldn't fit...Then I realized – IT WAS VERY JACK SMITH – he would have stuck out too (...and failed too – STRUCK OUT TOO...)...Everyone was very sweet to me...& I think they liked what I did. Jim wants me to talk more – he said those stories need to be told again.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Nash, Charles. 1994. *Montgomery Clift Was Queer*. Lansing, MI. Print.

¹⁴⁹ Johns, Jake. "Charlie Nash Is Dead." Charlie Nash is Dead, September 15, 2020. <https://charlie.b414.org/>.

¹⁵⁰ Nash, Charles. 1994. *Montgomery Clift Was Queer*. Lansing, MI. Print.

Here, we can see that Nash is deeply influenced by Jack Smith and using that influence to create his own art where he gets to share all of his excitement and knowledge about Smith to audiences who are invested in these kinds of art forms and communities. Furthermore, “Jim” asking Nash to talk more, to keep retelling the stories, shows how people continued to pass on these stories, these influences, and inspirations. Later in the zine, Nash recounts what happens after his performance, and he mentions a couple of people coming up to him to tell him their own experiences with Smith, or asking him to speak more about his own experiences. The queer underground community was still talking about the icons from the NYC queer underground well beyond the 1990s, and using these ideas, names, and so on, to influence their own art while sharing the queer and LGBTQ+ histories, through zines, shared events and performances, that were not discussed elsewhere.

During the 1980s and 1990s, many of the sentiments that were integral to the queer American underground film movement, were circulated via zines across the country, creating an expansive and ongoing conversation that tethered queer members and communities together, whether in the rural Midwest or the urban coasts. These zines are representative of the larger marginalized community that the queer underground film movement was informed by and connected to, and here they provide a reliable and well-worn method of community-building and sensibility-sharing to show how the characteristics, aesthetics, and history of the queer underground film movement were spread throughout the country. David E. James carves out this distinction in the larger underground film movement and argues that some of the underground filmmakers “that had evolved with more militant social groups” were less interested in the process and production possibilities of film and were more invested in “the possibility of

cinematic participation in violent political contestation.”¹⁵¹ While this chapter doesn’t necessarily address the “violent” political contestation, the zines reflect much of the rebellious sentiments that were key in the queer underground film movement, and represent an attempt to share these social and political critiques to community members across the country, long after the initial boom of the film movement. This is what makes the time period important, as the LGBTQ+ zines show how the queer underground was thriving and continuously responding to mainstream ideas about queerness, which was increasingly including conversations surrounding the AIDS epidemic and the censorship of queer art. The selected LGBTQ+ zines, then, are representative of the spread of the driving characteristics and sensibilities of the queer underground film movement through the 1980s and 1990s, and act as the communal voice of rebellion, inspiring social and political contestation across the country.

Zines have a long history that connects back to the early days of alternative presses and amateur journalism in the late 1800s, the science fiction fandoms and comics of the 1930s, and underground presses of the 1960s.¹⁵² But, the era of zines that this project is invested in really took off in the 1970s, as copy machines became easily available to the masses, and punk music was invigorating frustrated young people to reach out and communicate with likeminded people that wanted to rebel against “straight society.”¹⁵³ The punk scene is what really popularized zines amongst underground communities, but soon enough the popularity spread. In Julie Bartel’s book, *From A to Zine: Building a Winning Zine Collection in your Library*, she notes, “By the 1980s zines had become a staple of the punk lifestyle. With the rise of cheap and accessible photocopying—and the spread of the personal computer— the ‘zine revolution’ of the early

¹⁵¹ James, David E. *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, 165.

¹⁵² Rau, Michelle. “From APA to Zines: Towards a History of Zines.” *Alternative Press Review*, 1994, 10-12.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

1980s really took off, and the medium exploded past the punk scene into an underground network of publishers, editors, writers, and artists.”¹⁵⁴ Zines became a way for likeminded community members to speak out, to share and to draw in connections with others. Around the same time, there was also an explosion in the film festival world that mirrored the zine explosion in a way. Drawing from Leanne Dawson and Skadi Loist’s article, “Queer/ing film festivals: history, theory, impact,” they write:

In the 1970s and 1980s, several specialized film festivals relating to new social movements started to emerge, including: feminist, Black and African-American, indigenous, gay and lesbian, as well as those advocating for other human rights, dis/ability and the environment. Since the 1980s, the third phase has seen a strong professionalization and increased diversification of the festival landscape.¹⁵⁵

Around this time, it seems as though multiple marginalized and somehow othered groups were finding power in numbers and coming together to share their content, whether through zines or films or other venues. Zines may even reflect an excitement from seeing or hearing content that may not have been accessible previously and wanting to share it with others. And film festivals, like AAFF and others, very likely brought queer underground film content to new audiences and generations that may have sparked the desire to find and talk to other people with similar aesthetics and criticisms.

This zine explosion included queer underground communities, primarily populated by LGBTQ+ zinesters that were invested in disrupting and rebelling against heteronormative and gender ideals, while also providing information and lines of communication for their peers. The punk and LGBTQ+ communities did have a significant overlap, and in one of the early issues of *Holy Titclamps*, there is an instance wherein a straight male, who is invested in the punk scene,

¹⁵⁴ Bartel, Julie. *From A to zine: Building a winning Zine collection in your library*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2004, 8.

¹⁵⁵ Dawson, Leanne, and Skadi Loist. 2018. “Queer/Ing Film Festivals: History, Theory, Impact.” *Studies in European Cinema* 15 (1): 1–24. doi:10.1080/17411548.2018.1442901.

got his hands on the *Holy Titclamps* zine and wrote in to Larry-Bob. Darryl Pestilence writes in that he picked up the zine not knowing it was “aimed at the gay community,” but that he enjoyed the zine and wanted to write a note about AIDS for the *Holy Titclamps* zine. He writes, “I’m not gay and never contemplated it, but I have been attacked for defending homosexuals. I still have a little hatred for homosexuals but I also relate to them; I am a punk and a person in the John Waters vein: I dig shock value.”¹⁵⁶ He writes about AIDS and equal rights, and asks readers of *Holy Titclamps* to submit contributions to his sine, *Bullpress*, as a way to enlighten his readers on others on “how life can be with AIDS to all fronts, gay, lesbians, needle users, straights, homophobics, and celibates.”¹⁵⁷ This letter reflected the overlap between many of these communities that were invested in shock value, in disrupting the status quo, and while Daryl Pestilence was coming from a different perspective, there was a shared investment in rejecting the mainstream and its limited representations. The LGBTQ+ zines I researched tended to share a punk sensibility in this sense, but took the rebellious, disruptive elements and focused them on areas of strife for queer and LGBTQ+ livelihoods, but also beyond that, to cover multiple marginalized groups.

Now, while there wasn’t consistent discussion of the underground film movement of the 1960s and 1970s within the zines, there are clear references and an overlapping queer underground sensibility throughout. Stephen Duncombe in his text *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* succinctly notes, “Zines are speaking to and for an underground culture.”¹⁵⁸ Zines are oftentimes created by folks who are on the margins of society,

¹⁵⁶ Richards, Laurence (Larry-bob). 1989. *Holy titclamps*. MN: Larry-bob. Print.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Duncombe, Stephen. *Notes from Underground: Zines and The Politics of Alternative Culture*. Portland, OR: Microcosm Publishing, 2017., 8

who do not fit in with the status quo and the demands of mainstream trends and ideals; folks who are well-versed in underground ideas and content. Duncombe continues:

In an era marked by the rapid centralization of corporate media, zines are independent and localized, coming out of cities, suburbs and small towns across the US, assembled on kitchen tables. They celebrate the everyperson in a world of celebrity...Defining themselves against a society predicated on consumption, zinesters privilege the ethic of DIY, do-it-yourself: make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you. Refusing to believe the pundits and politicians who assure us that the laws of the market are synonymous with the laws of nature, the zine community is busy creating a culture whose value isn't calculated as profit and loss on ruled ledger pages, but it is assembled in the margins, using criteria like control, connection, and authenticity.¹⁵⁹

This description of zines and zinesters feels similar to many of the driving ideals of the filmic queer underground, specifically the rebellion against the mainstream, against consumerism, and incorporating DIY production and aesthetics. The imagery of zinesters assembling these radical pamphlets full of art, writings, letters, and manifestos on their midwestern or suburban kitchen tables is important here, as it shows that these sentiments and sensibilities were never stagnant in the coastal locales of the underground film booms – they trickled out and informed a larger queer underground community that didn't want to keep the information or ideas to themselves. These zinesters and readers reflect the potential audience members of the queer underground film movement; they are the folks that are invested in building community based on shared sentiments and ideals that engage with content that disrupts mainstream norms about gender, sexuality, and concepts of propriety.

While many of these zines, and even the more specified LGBTQ+ zines, don't always take up underground film as a primary topic, they do highlight many of the attitudes and critiques that are also present in the queer underground film communities, harkening onto a larger queer underground community. The zine format is one that is specifically attuned to

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7

underground scenes, as they are intentionally anti-consumerist and act as amateur publications in a number of ways. In Ron Chepesiuk's "Libraries Preserve the Latest Trend in Publishing," he writes:

They lampoon, attack, parody, entertain or instruct on virtually any imaginable aspect of our culture, from AIDS to poetry, dirt bikers, New Wave comics and the popular television show "Beverly Hills 90210." A zine is almost always unsophisticated in appearance and format, often produced by desktop publishing, collated by hand, and limited in audience and distribution, usually to fewer than 2000 copies.¹⁶⁰

This makes zines a perfect source for investigating subcultures and underground communities, as they tend to be circulated and created by people in-the-know to other folks within the community. And the distinct anti-establishment attitude is one that fuels many of the counternarratives that zines provide, and the communication networks that they create allow for a cross-country discussion. Michigan State University librarian, Randy Scott notes, "Zines are a form of communication among like-minded isolates all over the world," which makes room for input from community members whose voices may not have been raised otherwise.¹⁶¹ In this regard, LGBTQ+ zines can provide insight to the queer underground community and culture across America, as well as tracking how it these sentiments were shared via the postal system.

In this chapter, I will continue to draw out the argument from Chapter 2: that the queer underground film movement did not end once the boom was over, but instead, it sent out shock waves amongst the larger queer underground community that spanned decades and much of the United States. In this chapter, the zines will be the primary focus to highlight how exactly the sentiments of the queer underground film movement were shared country-wide through queer creators and memorialized over time. Furthermore, by geographically mapping the LGBTQ+

¹⁶⁰ Chepesiuk, Ron. "Libraries Preserve the Latest Trend in Publishing: Zines." The Zine & E-Zine Resource Guide. American Libraries.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

zines, a network of queer underground communities arises beyond the urban coasts, and instead presents a much more varied and resilient queer underground that was deeply invested in finding and building a community with shared sensibilities. First, I analyze several zines to show how they adhered to the four characteristics of the queer underground film movement: shamelessly amateur aesthetics, unseriousness, LGBTQ+ themes and vulgarity and community and collaboration. This is to explicate the shared sensibilities among the LGBTQ+ zines and the queer underground film movement, making the argument that the communities are overlapped and informed by each other, per James' distinction of the more socially and politically invested fork of the underground film movement. Then, I map out the queer zine underground, pulling from a number of queer zines and queer zine archives. Much like Chapter 2, the information is plotted on a map with an in-depth table to follow, as well as analysis. This corpus of zines from the 1980s and 1990s portray each of the characteristics and present a long-lasting representation of the queer underground film movement and how it deeply influenced the queer underground community as a whole for years following the initial boom. I argue that the LGBTQ+ zines were one of the primary forms of community building within the queer underground, and that by tracing where they were shipped from, we can see and conceive of a much more extensive network of safe havens and hubs for queer underground film and community members beyond the coastal urban centers.

Shared Community, Shared Ethos: LGBTQ+ Zines and Queer Underground Film

The LGBTQ+ zines from the 1980s and 1990s may not perfectly overlap with the queer underground film movement, however, they are emblematic of a larger queer underground community of folks who were highly aware and critical of popular culture and society. The zines offer a clear voice of rebellion that was informed and inspired by many of the characteristics of

the queer underground film movement and reflect the longevity and resilience of the movement and its characteristics for decades following its inception. While the zines don't align with the initial boom era of the queer underground film movement in the 1960s and 1970s, there several discussions and mentions of some of the key figures, as well as representations of the four main characteristics that I lined out in the introduction: shamelessly amateur aesthetics, unseriousness, LGBTQ+ themes and vulgarity, and community and collaboration.

Before looking into the overlaps between the queer underground film movement and the LGBTQ+ zines and the shared queer underground community, first we must attend to the changes in the social and political landscape as we enter the focus on the 1980s and 1990s. The end of the 1970s saw the beginning of the era of the New Right within conservative politics, ushering in a new foundation for the Republican party that doubled down on anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments in favor of a heteronormative nuclear family structure. Carol Mason, in her book titled *Oklahomo*, discusses the difference between the Old and New Right, in regard to the New Right, she says:

The front lines on which they battled were education, abortion and homosexuality, all of which they viewed as targeting their children. Communism was still considered a serious threat by the New Right, but instead of worrying about commies already secretly ensconced in the government, as McCarthy did, their fear now was that secularizing the nation would weaken it sufficiently that its enemies could take control.¹⁶²

This response to LGBTQ+ communities wasn't fully solidified until 1977, when Anita Bryant, a popular singer who has won Miss America, created a dedicated anti-LGBTQ+ group.¹⁶³ These sentiments drew in some of the unhappy Democrats at the time, and eventually led to the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980. Reagan's presidency and his Reaganomics reform quickly led to a recession in 1981, which came alongside the first public reports of a mystery illness that

¹⁶² Mason, Carol. *Oklahomo*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015.) 83

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* 85

we know now as AIDS. Despite the growing fear and the mounting death toll, Reagan and his administration remained silent about AIDS until 1987, when the epidemic was finally addressed in Executive Order 12601.¹⁶⁴ At this time, there were already over 10,000 deaths from AIDS and AIDS-related complications, and the government showed a resilient lack of support throughout the majority of the 1980s.¹⁶⁵

The lack of information about AIDS and the reignited need for communal support within the LGBTQ+ community led to new forms of communication arising. This was also possible because of the increased access to tools like copy machines. In *Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art, and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century*, author Kate Eichhorn writes,

Emerging in the early 1970s just as copy machines started to move out of offices and libraries and into bodegas and copy shops, New York's downtown scene benefited from this new form of inexpensive print production from the outset: musicians without agents lined up at copy machines to turn out homemade posters advertising upcoming gigs; downtown artists embraced copy machines as a way to move their art out of the gallery and museum and into the street; and writers seized copy machines as a way to self-publish zines, broadsides, and even books.¹⁶⁶

This popularity and accessibility continued through the 1980s and 1990s, with copy machines being available via public libraries, and with an entire market of copy and printing stores, like Kinkos. For LGBTQ+ members, this allowed for a much speedier process of copying artworks, zines, posters, etc., and made communication to likeminded community members much easier and more widespread. Technological advancements like these created more opportunities for LGBTQ+ community members, along with other underground, alternative, and non-mainstream groups, to reach out and talk to other members. Paired with political conservatism, financial

¹⁶⁴ "Ronald Reagan: 1987 (in Two Books) : Reagan, Ronald ." Internet Archive, January 1, 1989.

¹⁶⁵ "Current Trends Mortality Attributable to HIV Infection/AIDS -- United States, 1981-1990." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, January 25, 1991.

¹⁶⁶ Eichhorn, Kate. *Adjusted margin: xerography, art, and activism in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.

recession, fear of AIDS, and the suffocating, heteronormative status quo, the desire and necessity to communicate was heightened, and the copy machine and the postal service made cross-country discussions possible.

And due to these surrounding societal and political contexts, the LGBTQ+ zines reflect a slight change in how community members were responding. As opposed to the personalized, optimistic representations of free love, queer communities, and more in the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s saw a much more aggressive response to the mainstream and treatment of queer and or marginalized communities. These changes are clear in the characteristics of the queer underground, and during this era, the characteristics shift to be a bit more rebellious rather than celebratory. This is why I call this chapter “Messages of Queer Underground Rebellion,” because the LGBTQ+ zines represent this shift in attitude and the characteristics. In these decades, the queer underground community was now facing more direct forms of abuse by way of political silence, and the fear-mongering surrounding AIDS, and so their responses became more aggressive, rebellious, and communal. This is present in the LGBTQ+ zines, and while there is a shift in attitudes, the LGBTQ+ zines still share many of the characteristics, sentiments, and sensibilities of the queer underground film movement that exploded in the 1960s.

While not many of the LGBTQ+ zines I have researched are solely focused on queer underground film, there have been a significant number of instances where members, whether ancillary or tangential, have been name-dropped or discussed within the zines. To begin with an outlier, in the *Queer Zine Explosion* #7, there is a listing for a UK-based zine, which wasn’t included in the mapping, as it falls outside of the United States. However, it is relevant to mention because in its description, they list an interview with actress Marion Eaton as part of the issue. Marion Eaton was a George Kuchar regular and is probably most well-known in the queer

underground community for her role in *Thundercrack!* by Curt McDowell. This reflects that not only has *Thundercrack!* found traction across the Atlantic Ocean, but also it remained relevant enough to be discussed in a zine almost two decades after the film had been made. Now, to venture back to American LGBTQ+ zines, there were also a significant number of examples of mentions of key figures from the queer underground film movement, including a Jack Smith birthday issue of *Query*. *Query* was a single-authored zine by Charles Nash out of Lansing, Michigan, which was published from the mid to late 1990s. This issue of *Query* was released on November 14, 1995, which would have been Smith's 63rd birthday if he hadn't died of AIDS related illness in 1989. The issue was dedicated to Smith, and like most of Nash's zines, was primarily a diary of some of his travels, visiting friends and other community members in the surrounding areas, as well as important dates, like Tilda Swinton's birthday and artist, Ray Johnson's death. Nash was quite a name-dropper, and thus in this issue, he even included a kind of glossary of who's-who, where he lists Jack Smith as "a legendary filmmaker (*Flaming Creatures*), theatrical genius (*Orchid Rot of Rented Lagoon*) & exotic art consultant."¹⁶⁷ In this glossary, he also includes names like Parker Tyler, John Cage, Charles Allcroft, Yves Klein, etc.

There were also a number of examples of overlap within the *Fanorama* zine. This zine is a Rhode Island based zine created by R.E.B., or Richard E. Bump. It was first published in 1992, and continued through the early 2000s. *Fanorama* included reprinting an article from *The Advocate* titled "Shooting Star: Teenage Video Maker Sadie Benning Attracts a Youthful Audience," in issue #7, a reprinted still from Andy Warhol's *Blow Job* (1963) in issue #8, as well as listing Bruce LaBruce's *No Skin off my Ass* as the film of the month in issue #1.¹⁶⁸ While Sadie Benning and Bruce LaBruce aren't necessarily considered as key members of the queer

¹⁶⁷ Nash, Charles. 1995. *Query*, Issue #2. East Lansing, MI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

¹⁶⁸ REB. 1992-1994. *Fanorama*, Issues #1-8. Providence, RI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

underground film movement, their work could still be considered as being influenced by the original movement and the creators that were key members. Furthermore, in a zine out of Raleigh, NC, *Lil' Hustler*¹⁶⁹ published in 1995, there was a Hall of Fame includes of queer icons, and included in this list were Jack Smith, Kenneth Anger, David Wojnarowicz, and more.¹⁷⁰ Some other examples include a discussion of NY and Chicago queer film fests and *Paris is Burning* in *Thing*, published out of Illinois; *Fuh Cole*, a Wisconsin zine, including a discussion of David Wojnarowicz's films and art; *Tang*, out of California, with mentions of Andy Warhol and Valerie Solanis; another California zine, *RUH Roh!* with Todd Haynes and Sadie Benning mentioned in its description; and *Holy Titclamps* with obituaries and biographies of Jack Smith, Parker Tyler, including mentions of Jonas Mekas and Andy Warhol, as well as a reprinted still from Marlon T. Riggs' *Affirmations* (1990), and parodic writings by filmmaker, Jenni Olson.¹⁷¹

These instances in the zines show that while the LGBTQ+ zines didn't take up the queer underground film movement specifically, the creators were generally aware and educated on several queer underground filmmakers and artists. Even though many of these zines were published in the 1990s, they were still informed by the queer underground film movement and working to spread the word to unaware LGBTQ+ readers. And while these mentions of queer underground filmmakers are an important resource, the zines also adhere in several ways to the characteristics of the queer underground film movement. In the following sections, each characteristic will be explored with examples drawn from this large corpus of zines, with a specific focus being on zines that fall outside of the main boom centers of New York City and

¹⁶⁹ *Lil' Hustler* was a zine published out of North Carolina, with very little information provided about the creator. The one issue available in MSU Special Collections was from 1995, and I have not been able to track down any other issues or information about this zine.

¹⁷⁰ *Lil' Hustler*. 1995. Raleigh, NC. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

¹⁷¹ Richards, Laurence (Larry-bob). 1993. *Queer Zine Explosion*, Issue #7. SF, CA: Larry-bob. Print.

the California urban centers of Los Angeles and San Francisco. While I may draw some examples from these states, my goal has been to focus more so on zines coming out of areas that may not traditionally be thought of when discussing the queer underground community in order to highlight how thoroughly the sentiments infiltrated the country and the community beyond the urban coasts. The LGBTQ+ zines and the examples I have drawn out from them will show that they carried on these themes and ideals that were originally formed in the queer underground film movement and spread them even further.

Queer Underground Characteristic #1: Shamelessly Amateur Aesthetics

In an article written for Barnard College, the Coordinator of Reference Services and Zine Librarian, Jenna Freedman distinguished a list of key characteristics of zines that includes, “1. Self-published and the publisher doesn’t answer to anyone, 2. Small, self-distributed print run, 3. Motivated by desire to express oneself rather than to make money, 4. Outside the mainstream, and 5. Low budget.”¹⁷² While the community of zinesters is large and extremely varied, the similarities tend to be in the medium, the format, and style that they do and do not take. Freedman hones in on this similarity and presents zines as a genre that rejects publication norms and standards. She writes, “Being able to violate copyright and readers’ ethics or sensibilities have their good and bad points. Part of what makes zines what they are and what makes them so great is the total freedom not afforded to, but taken by the zinester.”¹⁷³ Here, we can see that the zine has a more free reign in terms of publication, as zinesters are not beholden to any larger press, including the standards that come alongside that obligation. It is an inherent element, then, of zines that they can be shamelessly amateur in their production, not just out of financial need,

¹⁷² Freedman, Jenna. “Are Zines Blogs?” Are Zines Blogs?. Barnard Zine Library, 2005. <https://zines.barnard.edu/are-zines-blogs>.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

but also as a rejection and a rebellion against the norms and standards of publishing in other formats.

During the 1980s and 1990s, zines were generally made by collaging cut up pieces of paper, magazines, letters, etc. and xeroxing them together, adding pagination, and then stapling the booklet together. This process could be very detailed and tedious and can result in beautifully formatted zines, however, this was rarely the case with LGBTQ+ zines. There were some outliers in my research, namely *Brains*, which had a very polished and professional aesthetic, probably to align with the more academic and smart-is-sexy scope of the material. Primarily, though, the process of creating the zines was very present in their finished products, with layers of varying images and texts stacked on top of each other, oftentimes haphazardly. In Figure 5, the layered images and text are prevalent in this excerpt from *Penetrated Pork* #1[sic]¹⁷⁴ out of Athens, Georgia, with the text running vertically instead of horizontally, as well as some of the text being flipped.¹⁷⁵ Reading this page takes some maneuvering, flipping around the zine to read each line and to thread the information together. This is a prevalent theme within the LGBTQ+ zines from this era – they provide a challenge to an easy read. Readers have to work to read every little piece, or just accept that they may miss little bits of information in the cacophony of images and text. Here, we can draw another example from the zine *Abrupt Lane Edge* #2 out of Minneapolis, MN.¹⁷⁶ Upon opening up the zine, the first page inside the cover includes a handwritten message: “Yeah, this is the intro page, so fuck off! Why am I obligated to tell you what you’ll see in this issue? Are you so lame that you can’t just start reading this and enjoy it or

¹⁷⁴ *Penetrated Pork* [sic] is a Georgia and Alabama based zine, created by Jean Paul Page. The two first issues were published in 1995 and 1996, and I cannot find any more issues, or any clear information about how long the zine ran for.

¹⁷⁵ Page, Jean Paul. 1996. *Penetrated Pork*, Issue #1. Athens, GA. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

¹⁷⁶ *Abrupt Lane Edge* is a zine out of Minneapolis, MN, as well as Ann Arbor, MI. The zine ran for six years between 1992-1996, and was edited/created by Christopher Wilde.

do I have to read it out loud to you?”¹⁷⁷ Not only does this message completely reject publication standards in terms of not having a table of contents, or any kind of introduction to the issue, but it also presents a kind of humorous resentment at the expectation of a table of contents. This kind of message prepares the reader for a haphazard reading experience, where there are no rules and even the creator doesn’t want to tell the reader where to start or how to make their way through the zine.

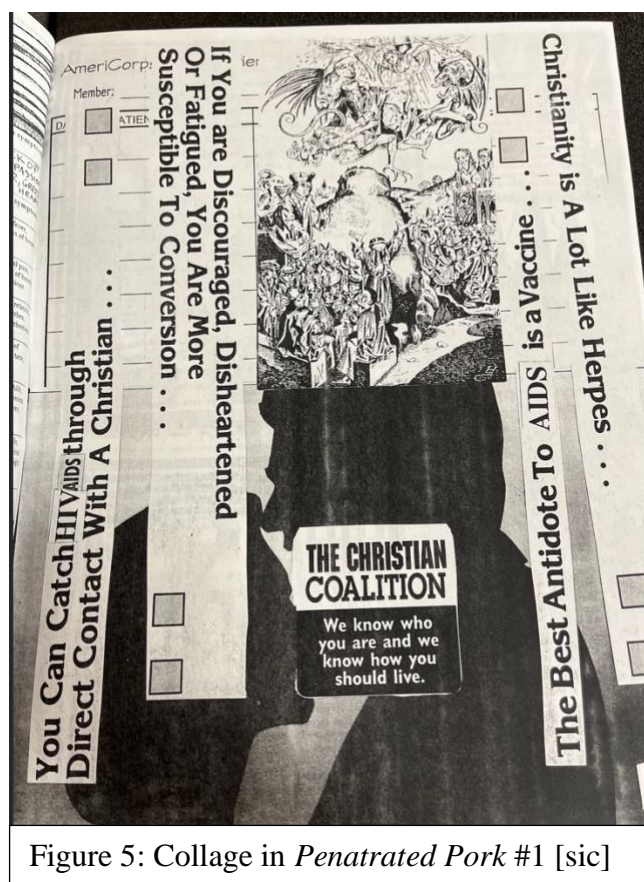


Figure 5: Collage in *Penetrated Pork* #1 [sic]

Of course, there were also a number of general publication rules that the LGBTQ+ zines regularly broke at whim. First and foremost are the standards of the English language, including spelling and a complete lack of copyediting. In *Lil' Hustler*, words like “dik” and “sed” are sprinkled throughout, and within the larger corpus of zines there are often these types of

¹⁷⁷ Wilde, Christopher. 1993. *Abrupt Lane Edge*, Issue #2. Minneapolis, MN. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

misspellings. Especially considering the number of submissions, letters, and personals that get printed, there is a variety of folks with many different education backgrounds that send their writing in to be published in their favorite queer zine. These submissions are rarely, if ever, checked for grammatical and spelling issues – even *Penetrated Pork* points out the misspelling in its own title on the cover page of the first issue. Furthermore, there is no standard size of zines, some as large as 8x11 standard paper size, down to zines that can fit in your palm. Oftentimes there is no pagination, and it is frequently difficult to tell where the media is sourced from. The lack of a crediting system or format meant that the regular publication standards of not only crediting or citing an original source or author, but also gaining legal permissions to reprint material was completely overlooked and rejected. Unlike a press, zines are rarely beholden to copyright laws, mostly because they are a small enough print run for underground communities, and never really end up circulating largely enough to garner negative attention from copyright holders. This is also a reason for many zinesters creating aliases or pseudonyms, so that if there were any legal issue it would be difficult to track the creator down. Not working within the structures of copyright and normal publication timelines means that zinesters can also follow their own publication schedule. There is no need to wait for copyright permissions to clear, or for contracts to be signed, and so zines were released when they were ready and complete, and only then.

Thus, a regular practice within the LGBTQ+ zines is the use of the xerox to copy images or text from other publications, including magazines, newspapers, etc. The aesthetic of the xerox was perfect for these queer zines, as Michelle Rau points out in “From APA to Zines,” an article from the 1994 summer/spring issue of *Alternative Press Review*, “The contrasty black and white graphics now possible suited the punk aesthetic – bleak, harsh, rude, polarized against straight

society.”¹⁷⁸ Therefore, as was typical of xeroxing at the time, this meant that oftentimes legibility was not a given in the images or text. Figure 6 is a collection of some examples of the issues with legibility that xeroxing creates, as presented in *Judy*¹⁷⁹ Issue #2.¹⁸⁰ In the first of the two images, we can see that there is a distinct lack of gray tones which has created a very blown-out image of a young Judy Garland. The shades of gray that would usually reflect the contours of her face and clothes have been contrasted out to the point of basic black outlines and a stark white negative space between. In this same image, though, we can also see how xeroxing can create a kind of visual static that obscures the text bubble and the text within it. The image on the right side is showing how text, too, can be ambiguated by the xerox, where it becomes illegible in the process of reprinting. And what is even more relevant is the fact that these images were kept in the zine despite their copying and printing issues. There was probably no time or funds to justify reprinting all of the issues just to fix the legibility, and within the community, it didn’t seem to offend readers. This kind of image and text blow-out and/or static is a part of the aesthetic of these LGBTQ+ zines, and they are such regular occurrences that when a LGBTQ+ zine doesn’t have these issues, it sticks out greatly in comparison.

¹⁷⁸ Rau, Michelle. “From APA to Zines: Towards a History of Zines.” *Alternative Press Review*, 1994, 13.

¹⁷⁹ *Judy* is an Iowa-based zine created by Miss Spentyouth, or Andrea Lawlor-Mariano. The two issues I have seen mentioned were in 1993 and 1994, and I have not found any indication that there were more than these two issues.

¹⁸⁰ Miss Spentyouth. 1994. *Judy*, Issue #2. Iowa City, IA. Queer Zine Archive Project Web Site.

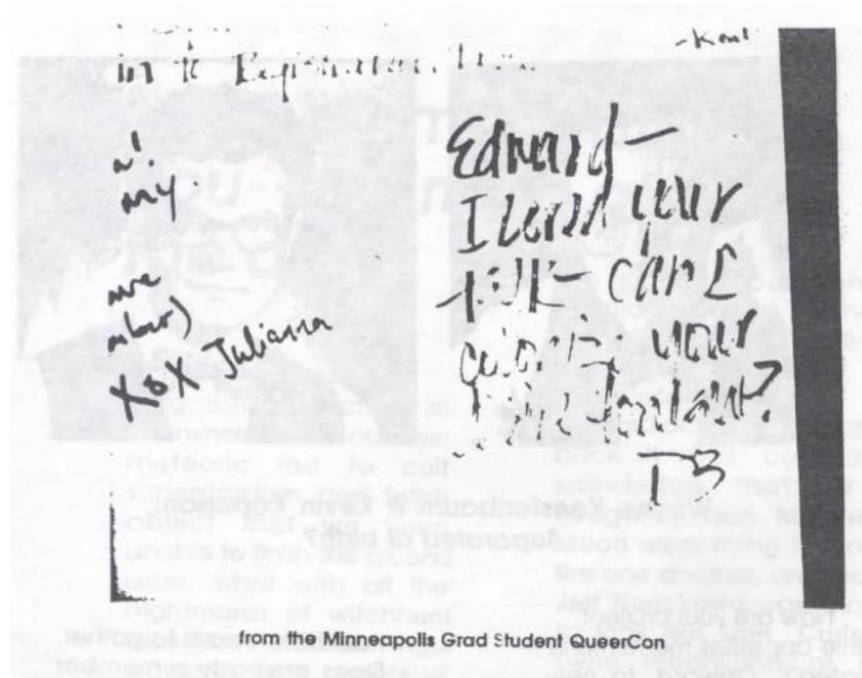


Figure 6: Xeroxing examples from *Judy* Issue #2

Overall, the LGBTQ+ zines did not abide by most of the publication standards that have been entrenched in presses, magazines, newspapers, and more. Instead, zinesters used the tools that were available to them – pens, paper, scissors, glue, tape and the xerox machine – and

leaned into this DIY aesthetic. This aesthetic may not perfectly overlap with the amateur aesthetics of queer underground filmmakers, but they were informed by similar sentiments in that both were borne out of a low budget, use -what-is-available, creation style that didn't care to align with standards of the larger, respected communities. Both aesthetics were created in opposition and rejection to the standardized norms of film and publication, and instead worked against those grains to create something that celebrated the amateur and their voices.

Queer Underground Characteristic #2: Unseriousness

The ability to laugh and poke fun at what is primarily regarded as serious content is something that queer communities, and specifically queer underground communities, have become practiced and proficient in as a way to survive the dread of being a marginalized and demonized community. The LGBTQ+ zines have this unserious perspective throughout, making jokes out of content that many may regard in-poor-taste to make light of during the 1980s and 90s, like the AIDS epidemic, police brutality, the Catholic church and pedophilia, and more. In Issue #2 of *Penetrated Pork* [sic], this concept is discussed in a section called "Sugestion [sic] Page: For the benefit of humanity on an individual level," wherein one of the listed suggestions is to "Laugh":

The light heart rises through all sorrow. Humor is the trademark of the fool and the treasure of the wise. It is the universal language of positivity and transcends all borders. It is the medicine of the soul and within it are revealed all the secrets of life. It is the bride that can connect us all and the wings that can lift us up above any trouble that we confront. Laughter is the purest and most obscure form of love known to humanity. "Ha ha" your life into a brighter day. Taking things too seriously acts as a blinder to the eyes of self-improvement. Humor is the remedy to the poisons that plague the self.¹⁸¹

Here, laughter is the solution to division, to hatred, to darkness and poison, but what it also provides is an avenue towards criticism. While the role of laughter as a reprieve is absolutely

¹⁸¹ Page, Jean Paul. 1996. *Penetrated Pork*, Issue #2. Birmingham, AL. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

important, when discussing unseriousness, there is another element wherein the laughter doesn't just lift one up from the pits of shame that society has relegated them to, it also provides a tool to respond to and critique society and the norms that it hails. Duncombe writes about this element of zines, noting, "zine writers use laughter to assert control over a culture that is close to them, but impossibly distant at the same time."¹⁸² In this case, the laughter and unseriousness present in the LGBTQ+ zines are created by asserting some kind of control over the media that is usually used to demean the community. Unseriousness, then, allows one to recognize the seriousness of the matter, while also creating tongue-in-cheek criticisms that engage a darker humor.

LGBTQ+ zines can provide a number of examples of unseriousness across states and years that oftentimes still engenders laughter even decades later.

One of the key formats that unseriousness takes in the LGBTQ+ zines is with the juxtaposition of serious content alongside images or text that may make light or poke fun at the information presented. For example, in *Dry Pocket to Piss In*¹⁸³, out of Richmond, Indiana, there is a series of pages about the Catholic church and the pedophilia scandals that had been gaining popularity in the early 1990s. These pages include reprints of a variety of news articles with pictures of grinning priests, and a small comic of a young boy going to confession with a priest saying "Peace be with you! Take off your pants!" Following this spread, there is an illustration of Jesus on a cross, but the cross is an amalgamation of four highly-detailed phalli. And the next page is an informative collection of texts about male anti-rape resources.¹⁸⁴ Here, we can break down these few pages and see that while the subject of pedophilia in the Catholic church is taken

¹⁸² Duncombe, Stephen. *Notes from Underground: Zines and The Politics of Alternative Culture*. Portland, OR: Microcosm Publishing, 2017, 115.

¹⁸³ *Dry Pocket to Piss In* is an Indiana-based zine, created by Stevec Bones. This was a one shot zine, so it only had the single issue from 1992.

¹⁸⁴ Bones, Stevec. 1992. *Dry Pocket to Piss in*, Issue #1. Richmond, IN. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

seriously enough to report on it and provide resources, there are moments of levity that pull the reader out of the depressing reality to laugh and critique. There is a similar move in *Penetrated Pork* #2, wherein there is a spread about Christianity and AIDS, with an image of Reverend Falwell, renowned evangelical homophobe, holding a baby with a hand drawn text bubble that says, “Ahhhh...so you got A.I.D.S. Y’know even tho’...God does love you! I’ll take care of your son!!” Opposing that image, the next page has a picture of Jesus Christ, and instead of the expected Sacred Heart, Jesus is holding what looks like an enlarged Valentine heart with an arrow through it and cursive “Be Mine” in the middle. Finally, there is some handwritten text, “It’s time for the ‘right’ to wake up...or get the hell out of the way. Too many educational opportunities lost + way too many church doors still closed.”¹⁸⁵ Once again, the collage and juxtaposition of these images and messages relay a sense of humor with the altered image of Christ and the inclusion of Reverend Jerry Falwell (labeled as Reverend Farewell), but then also the elements of seriousness – that LGBTQ+ people are being neglected and ostracized from what should be supportive spaces. By placing all of these images and information together, both zines are showing how the content can flit into serious territory, and then be wrapped up in humor as a kind of safety blanket to continue through. So, even when faced with the harsh reality of the world, the unserious humor doesn’t allow the reader to wallow in it, and instead injects some humor and critique as an avenue towards living with that reality.

Beyond critiques against Christianity and evangelism, unseriousness was also used to poke fun at standards and censorship. LGBTQ+ zines were particularly attuned to the censorship debates focused on queer art during the late 1980s and the 1990s, which will be discussed further in the LGBTQ+ themes and vulgarity section. It not only was a frequent topic of discussion

¹⁸⁵ Page, Jean Paul. 1996. *Penetrated Pork*, Issue #2. Birmingham, AL. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

across multiple zines, but it was also an influential element of the larger societal culture that the zines were responding to and rejecting. This was done primarily by being “obscene,” by printing nude images and drawings and sex acts, etc., but also by drawing out criticisms of these debates and key figures. Here, we can draw back to the shock element of the Queer Disgust Aesthetic, wherein the use of “obscene” or disgusting imagery offers a doubled response, where heterosexual and more mainstream readers would be immediately turned off, as opposed to queer underground community members that would be willing and excited to engage with disgusting and shocking imagery. The LGBTQ+ zines regularly play with disgust and show a specific attunement to unseriousness in disgust, much like Kuchar’s videos, and offer levity to balance out some of the more disgusting aesthetic elements. One example is in *Fanorama* #7, wherein there is a section on breast cancer awareness. This spread is situated in the middle of the zine, and is sandwiched between a celebratory article about Sadie Benning, and a Barbie Dreamhouse ad that has been altered to point out hypocrisies in how Americans treat homeless populations. On both sides, there are celebratory and humorous pieces that lift the reader out of the seriousness of breast cancer, but the image provided alongside the statistics will linger. The image depicts surgeons working on removing a breast tumor from a patient. While it isn’t in color, the image is quite disgusting in that it shows an open wound with medical utensils pulling at skin, and it is extremely intimate in providing this perspective that very few people would have access to. Here the use of the Queer Disgust Aesthetic is presenting a shocking, intimate, and disgusting image to educate and inform, while also following it up with levity in the unserious and playful ad that follows. If the image and statistics had been the primary focus of the LGBTQ+ zine, then it may not have adhered to unseriousness or the Queer Disgust

Aesthetic, but the juxtaposition of this section and the way it utilized disgust can show just how adept the zinesters were at weaving in and out of serious content and laughter.

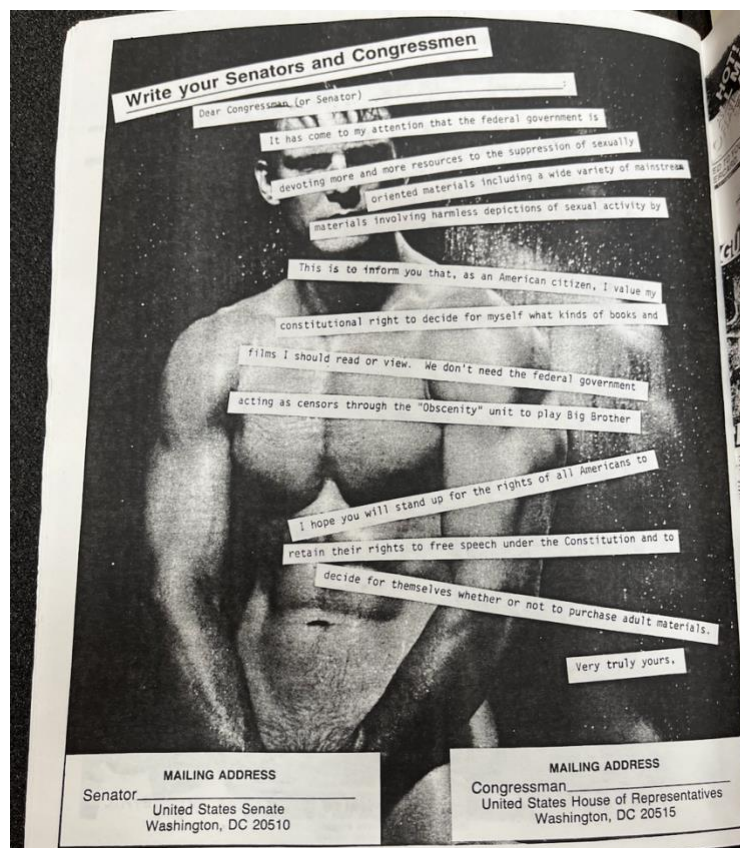


Figure 7: "Write your Senators and Congressmen" from *Fanorama*, Issue #1

Furthermore, there are also examples of unseriousness in regard to American politics and an especially unserious example can be found in *Fanorama* Issue #1, circulating out of Providence, RI. In Figure 7, there is an image of one of the pages from this issue, where there is a photocopied image of a nude man in what looks like a shower setting. Over top of the image is lines of cut-out text that are collaged together to form a letter for Senators and/or congressmen, asking them to protect the rights of American people to decide what they want to read and view, as well as to protect their free speech. The text includes open lines for the reader to fill in their

state Senator or congressman, as well as a generic mailing address in order to send the letter.¹⁸⁶

In this instance, the image itself isn't funny, nor is the text. However, the juxtaposition of the two and the idea of a member of Senate or Congress receiving this letter, does engage a humorous image. Throwing together these two concepts – a letter to a politician and a nude image of a man – encourages a sense of humor, even in the face of being censored. And to take it one step further, the humor is drawn from actually completing this action and sending the letter, so in this way the unseriousness not only welcomes a sense of levity, but it also emboldens the reader to actually send the letter in. Even a reader who may not care much about censorship might be tempted to send the letter in, only just as a kind of humorous rebellion to the controlling political system they live under.

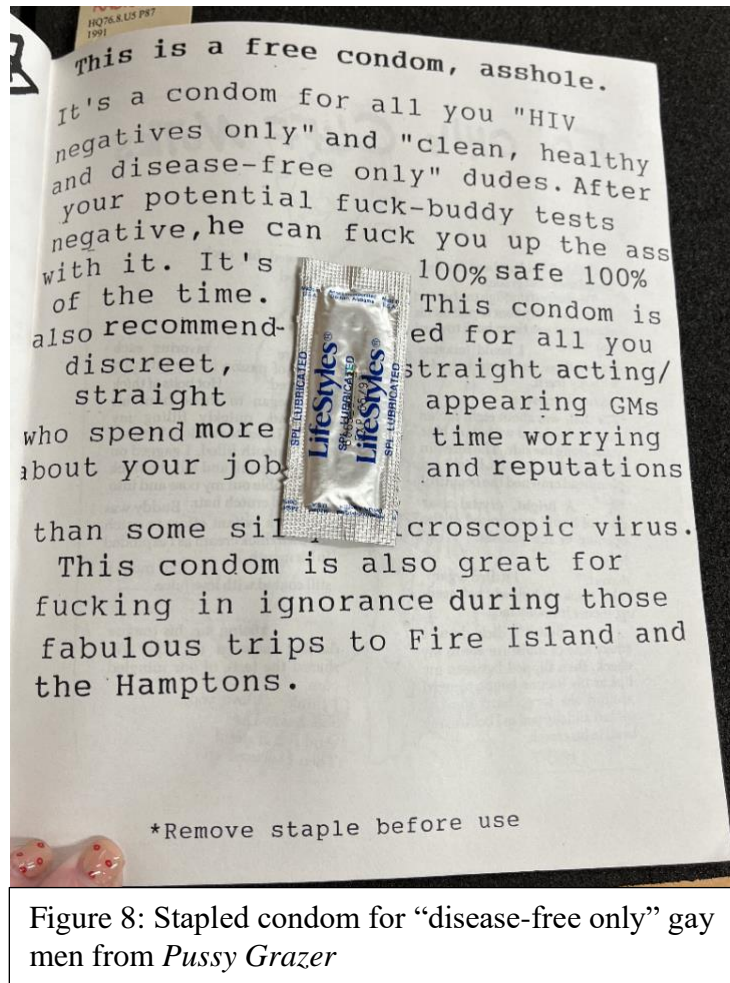
Finally, unseriousness was not just used to criticize the larger heteronormative society, it was also utilized to critique members of the LGBTQ+ community. In a 1991 issue of *Pussy Grazer*¹⁸⁷, a zine published out of New York City with contributions from Bruce LaBruce, there is an odd lump in the middle, something that is clearly not paper. Figure 8 shows what the reader finds when they open the zine to this page – a condom stapled through the middle to the page. It is not often that a zine comes with bulky additions, especially when being sent through the mail or passed between readers. So even the inclusion of an extra “gift” is a bit silly to begin with, but then that is heightened by the complete un-usability of the gift, as a stapled condom is a worthless condom. Even just seeing this included item welcomes a smirk, but the surrounding text is what really elevates the silliness of the stapled condom to unseriousness. The text lambasts gay men that include caveats like “HIV negatives only” in their personals, gay men that

¹⁸⁶ REB. 1991. *Fanorama*, Issue #1. Providence, RI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

¹⁸⁷ *Pussy Grazer* is a New York based zine edited by Annie Thing and Glenda Orgasm. Based on my research, there were only two issues, one in 1991, and one in 1992.

act straight and worry more about their “jobs and reputations than some silly microscopic virus,” and gay men that “fuck in ignorance during those fabulous trips to Fire Island.”¹⁸⁸ The gay man described here is one that is painted as a traitor to queer folks, as someone who prioritizes their individual comfort over the safety of their entire community. The written criticism is humorous on its own, as it is passionate, and it points to a type of gay man that many LGBTQ+ members know and disdain – the privileged gay who wouldn’t dare dirty his hands to help a member of the community. However, the inclusion of the stapled condom adds an element of seriousness and dark humor by raising the stakes. By gifting this stapled condom to this non-community of gay men, the author is essentially chancing AIDS and death upon these types of people. Of course, the authors most likely do not actually wish AIDS and death on this brand of gay men, especially considering that they would not be the audience for zines, but instead are creating an extreme joke for likeminded community members. This joke reflects the lack of care that some gay men had or have for the queer people that have AIDS and were deeply neglected and mistreated by the American government and society. The condom is a symbol of what stands between these privileged gay men and everyone else, and the staple shows just how easily it would be for the privileged few to fall from grace and re-join the rest of the community that cannot ignore or evade the ravages of AIDS. But it remains humorous for the queer zine audience, as it points out this hierarchy of privilege for some gay men and just how unstable and hypocritical it seems from the bottom.

¹⁸⁸ Thing, Annie and Glenda Orgasm. 1991. *Pussy Grazer*, Issue #1. New York City, NY. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.



Unseriousness is presented with a tongue in cheek humor in most of the LGBTQ+ zines that were researched for this project. Much like queer underground films, the zines rely on an audience that is willing and able to view serious content through a comedic and critical lens. Oftentimes the humor is juvenile, silly, and antagonistic all at the same time, and it builds up a sense of levity that makes it easier to contend with the seriousness of reality. Unseriousness, then, becomes a tool to wield when things are too real and too serious, not only to inject some joy and levity, but also to criticize and condemn. The boon of laughter makes survival and rebellion all the more possible for queer underground communities.

Queer Underground Characteristic #3: LGBTQ+ Themes and Vulgarities

Queer zines are almost undoubtedly going to address LGBTQ+ themes throughout, but vulgarity is another element altogether. However, it is also important to investigate what exactly is meant by vulgarity in this context, as the concept of being vulgar is very different based on perspective. In the queer underground zines, I found vulgarity to come in two main forms – as celebration, and as shocking opposition. Vulgarity generally means something that rejects a sense of good taste or a sense of propriety, both of which are culturally formed concepts. So, in the 1990s, vulgarity to a conservative Christian would entail any kind of graphic nudity or sexually explicit content, but that may not be read as vulgar to a queer troublemaker. Instead, what was socially deemed vulgar may in fact be a form of celebration for queer communities who have been taught to be ashamed of their bodies and their sexual desires from a young age. In this sense, LGBTQ+ vulgarity is referring to larger cultural concepts of propriety, but it may not actually read vulgar to the queer underground zine audience. For example, *Fanorama* #7 was an issue specifically for queer women, as REB had tried to garner submissions from queer women in the past but had little luck. Issue #7, then was called “The Queer GRRRL Issue,” and it celebrated and prioritized perspectives from queer women. In this issue, there are pictures of women joyously lifting up their shirts to reveal their breasts, comics about slam-dancing as a “way to meet new babes,” and more. One spread speaks to the concept of vulgarity as a rebellious celebration, and that is a poem called “9 cunts in 1 poem” by Kelly Brady. The poem itself is erotic, discussing the smell and joy of vaginas, but what really makes the spread “vulgar” is that it is surrounded by nine close-up photographs of a variety of vaginas.¹⁸⁹ Within the context of this zine and the community and audience it is geared towards, this is a clear celebration of the

¹⁸⁹ REB. 1993. *Fanorama*, Issue #7. Providence, RI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

vagina, for the encompassing American society, this would most likely be deemed obscene and vulgar. This argument could be made for almost all of the nudity that is present in the LGBTQ+ zines, as they provided an avenue to celebrate a queer lifestyle and this often-involved erotic stories or images since there wasn't very much of that kind of content available in the mainstream.

Another form of vulgarity within the zines was used as a tool to shock or to be humorously subversive. This form of vulgarity drew upon the resistance to queer artworks – namely the ongoing controversies happening with the National Endowment for the Arts and “obscene” art, which of course had a strong correlation to queer art, at the time. This resistance was discussed with the Queer Disgust Aesthetic as well, and there is overlap present here. To reiterate, Senator Jesse Helms, who advocated against the use of national funding of artworks that he deemed obscene after a Robert Mapplethorpe opening as well as *Piss Christ* by Andres Serrano, said, “The use of taxpayers’ dollars by the National Endowment for the Arts (‘NEA’) to subsidize offensive and obscene ‘art’ – in effect, to subsidize the efforts of moral relativists to undermine America’s Judeo-Christian heritage and morality – is such a threat to the future of our nation.”¹⁹⁰ As a response to his stance, queer zines not only ventured into the utilization of shock value and Queer Disgust Aesthetics, but it also included a few vulgar, targeted mixed media and art pieces to critique these statements. Mentions of Senator Jesse Helms and his stance against these artworks were present in a number of these zines, including Vol. 1 of *ECCE Queer*¹⁹¹ out of Seattle, WA, Issue #7 of *Homocore*¹⁹² out of California, and in a number of *Holy Titclamps*

¹⁹⁰ Helms, Jesse. “Is It Art of Tax-Paid Obscentiy - The NEA Controversy,” *Journal of Law and Policy* 2 (1994): 99

¹⁹¹ *ECCE Queer* is a “magazinet” based out of Seattle, WA. I was able to find two “volumes” from 1991 and 1992, but was not able to find any further issues. The creators/editors are only ever listed as “us,” but the contributors names are listed.

¹⁹² *Homocore* came out of the queer punk scene, and was primarily based out of San Francisco, CA. The creator was Tom Jennings, and the zine was created in 1988 and seven issues were produced by 1991, when the zine ceased publication.

issues, which were circulated out of Minneapolis, MN. The first issue, published in September 1989, has a full back page dedicated to this controversy wherein they reprinted “Thomas in Circle” by Robert Maplethorpe alongside text critiquing Senator Helms and his statements, ending with, “Ok, so maybe the government shouldn’t be funding art in the first place, but the National Endowment for the Arts was founded in the atmosphere of 1960’s idealism, when people thought the government’s job wasn’t telling us what to think.”¹⁹³ Furthermore, in the fifth issue of the zine, an art piece by Andy Baird was included, which features a naked man with an erect penis alongside a quote by Ben Johnson: “Art has an enemy called ignorance,” as well as text addressing Senator Helms. Baird writes, “Dear Senator Jesse Helms, here is a drawing submitted for your approval. May you find it beautiful & a work of art to encourage intellectual and moral improvement in the viewer.”¹⁹⁴ (Figure 9) Here, we can garner a sense of a tongue-in-cheek attitude in responding to these claims of obscenity, but also the use of nudity and vulgar imagery to critique and expand notions of artistry, much like the Queer Disgust Aesthetic and queer underground film did.

¹⁹³ Richards, Laurence (Larry-bob). 1989. *Holy titclamps*. MN: Larry-bob. Print.

¹⁹⁴ Richards, Laurence (Larry-bob). 1990. *Holy titclamps*. MN: Larry-bob. Print.



Figure 9 - Andy Baird Woodcut, *Holy Titclamps* #5

Some of the vulgarity was celebratory of queer sexuality, some of it was politically antagonistic, and then some of it was just included to be humorous. Part of the humor is of course heightened with a sense of edginess with the addition of vulgarity, and this was definitely present in the queer underground zines. There are a number of examples, like a Baby Sue comic in *Dry Pocket to Piss In*, where Baby Sue uses a cross as a masturbatory aid, or in *Fanorama* #8, where a full spread about autofellatio is included, with a number of images. The act of autofellatio is presented as a kind of work-around for straight men who wonder what “a dick feels like in his mouth,” but who don’t want to actually engage in gay sex acts. Figure 10 shows the images they paired with this article, along with quippy lines that sound like they are from an

infomercial: “Your parents will approve. Your boss will love it. So will your neighbors.”¹⁹⁵

These kinds of vulgar jokes and humor were a mainstay in the queer underground zines, as it helped keep that sense of levity up, and also offered some erotic imagery to enjoy. Furthermore, with these examples, there is a connection to the queer disgust aesthetic, in that the vulgar imagery here would turn off more mainstream readers, but the vulgarity plus the tongue-in-cheek humor would draw in queer underground community members who were more attuned to and invested in this kind of content. Overall, though, LGBTQ+ vulgarity and themes were utilized in a variety of ways, celebratory, rebellious, and humorously, for the queer underground community that enjoyed and sought out content which wasn’t readily available elsewhere – especially for folks outside of the queer urban hubs.

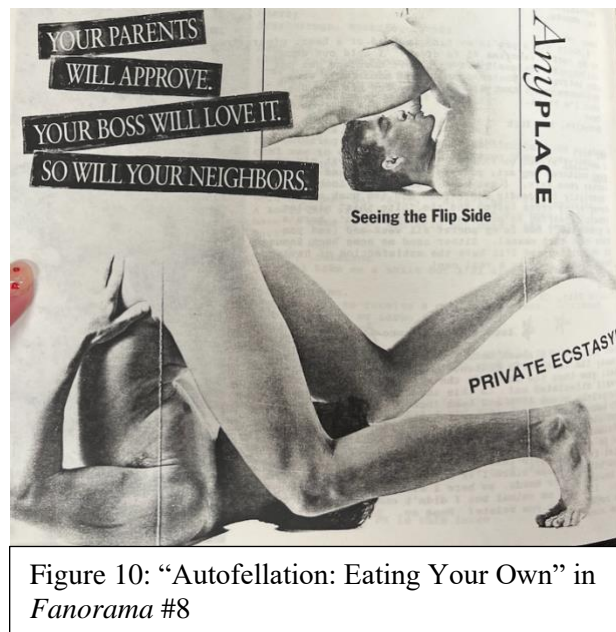


Figure 10: “Autofellation: Eating Your Own” in *Fanorama* #8

Queer Underground Characteristic #4: Community and Collaboration

In the larger sphere of zines, community and collaboration are already key components to the medium. Julie Bartel, author of *From A to Zine: Building a Winning Zine Collection in Your*

¹⁹⁵ REB. 1994. *Fanorama*, Issue #8. Providence, RI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

Library, argues that “the most distinguishing feature of zine culture...is that it is participatory: in order to be part of the culture one must participate; passivity is neither encouraged nor looked upon kindly.”¹⁹⁶ To be a part of the zine community, one needs to buy in – they need to take part, whether that be financially by sending in subscription dues, or by creating their own, or even trying to track down more zines. Bartel brings up this element of a disdain towards passivity, which can speak even more specifically to the queer underground community, as they were very invested in raising a raucous as an avenue towards political and cultural change regarding the treatment of LGBTQ+ folks. The queer underground zines, then, absolutely fell in line here and were very focused on creating a community of action-oriented folks with shared sensibilities, however that may look different for members across the country. For this section, both collaboration and community are found in excess within the queer underground zines, and so I will break them down into two sections to accurately address each.

Collaboration

Collaboration is present within zine creation, but also specifically within the LGBTQ+ zines that I researched. While some zines, like Charles Nash’s *Query*, were single-authored, the majority of the queer underground zines were collaborations between a group of queer creators. Primarily zines operated with a main editor or creator at the helm, who would welcome submissions from readers, friends, and community members, and then arrange them alongside their own additions to create an issue. Oftentimes, the zines would include a list of contributors, mostly consisting of a string of pseudonyms, that would clarify what elements of the zine came from which creator. Sometimes credit would just be given in a byline or in the corner of a page, or not at all. Folks who submit would also sometimes remain anonymous, assumedly out of fear

¹⁹⁶ Bartel, Julie. *From A to Zine: Building a Winning Zine Collection in Your Library*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2004, 12-13.

of being discovered, which meant too that there was always a safe way to participate for some of the community members that may not be able to live safely as an out and proud queer community member. There was also collaboration between queer zine creators, like REB of *Fanorama* and Stevec Bones of *Dry Pocket to Piss In*. In the first issue of *Fanorama*, the two creators collaborated on the issue, labeling REB as the east coast editor and Stevec Bones as the Midwest editor. This collaboration even included a shared visit to Fairmont, Indiana, or the hometown of James Dean, as seen in Figure 11.¹⁹⁷ This type of collaboration not only worked to create a queer zines, but it also built up the larger queer zine community.

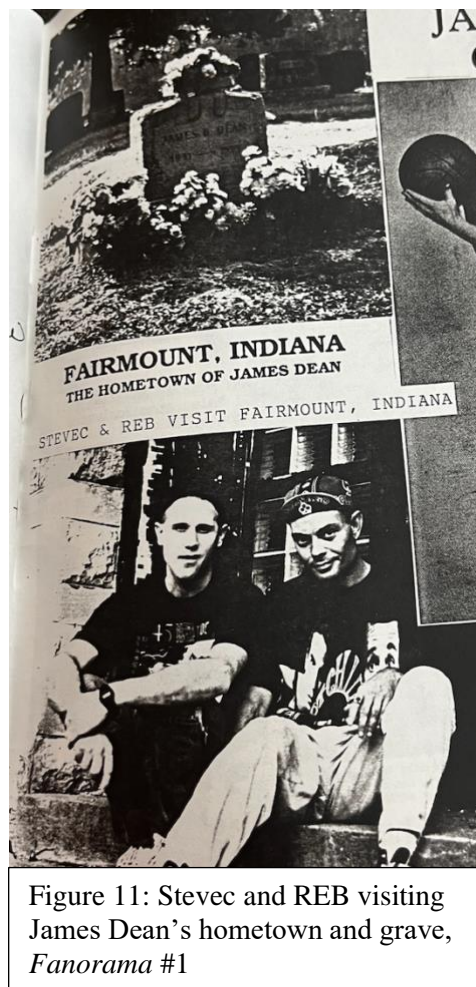


Figure 11: Stevec and REB visiting James Dean's hometown and grave, *Fanorama* #1

¹⁹⁷ REB and Stevec Bones. *Fanorama*, Issue #1. Providence, RI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

Many of the queer zine creators were invested in collaborating to build a strong community of queer zinesters. For example, in *Queer in MPLS*, another zine by Charles Nash, he excitedly writes about attending an event where he got to see REB talk, as well as chatting with Christopher Wilde of *Abrupt Lane Edge*. Many of these members of the queer zine underground were reaching out to others through the zines, calling for a community to come together.¹⁹⁸ The result of this was often much like what Larry-Bob of *Holy Titclamps* and *The Queer Zine Explosion* did, creating avenues and sections within his zines for readers to find more queer zines and build up their own community. However, it also included sharing events like SPEW: The Homographic Convergence, which was a zine get-together for the homo-core scene in particular. In *Holy Titclamps* #8, Larry-Bob included a spread of images from the event alongside his written summary of his experience. By publishing this and spreading the word about SPEW, Larry-Bob is essentially informing other community members of ways to connect with others. In *Queer Zine Explosion* #7, he also includes a section called “Upcoming Events,” where he mentions SPEW 3, which would take place in Toronto on May 15-16th in 1993. He highlights that it is a cheap and accessible event and calls it “A homocore alternative-queer thing (this is not a ‘convention’).”¹⁹⁹ Here, he is both advertising the event and showing that it isn’t some stuffy kind of convention his readers might assume it to be. This is a welcoming call for others to come and collaborate and take part in their community, which was a significant goal of the queer zines.

This collaboration in terms of community building was also present in terms of activism and calling other community members to step forward and help work towards a specific goal. On the most basic level, this included advertising for activist groups like ACT UP. In *Fanorama* #1,

¹⁹⁸ Nash, Charles. 1994. *Queer in MPLS*. Lansing, MI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

¹⁹⁹ Richards, Lawrence (Larry-Bob). 1993. *Queer Zine Explosion*, Issue #7. SF, CA. QZAP. Web.

there is a full page ad from ACT UP, which is a copy of one of their posters that showcase two men kissing with the text “Kissing doesn’t kill.”²⁰⁰ This also included attending queer activism events and reporting on them for the zines, which would hopefully inspire readers to take part as well. REB did this in *Fanorama* #5, wherein he wrote an article about his experience attending the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Civil Rights, which was one of the biggest protests at the time with estimates of over 300,000 attendees.²⁰¹ In this article, REB wrote about how varied the groups of people were, “I was impressed by the incredible diversity of the marchers. Queer skins held hands next to square dancers from Texas. Bare-breasted lesbians marches next to supportive straight men. People with HIV/AIDS displayed their KS lesions without shame. Gay veterans in uniform shared a park bench with queer anarchists. The march looked like America and America looked beautiful.”²⁰² Here, REB is showing how activism is a kind of collaboration between folks of different backgrounds who come together for one goal in mind. Later in the piece, REB calls for queer community members to take part in these events, to fight for the larger community by collaborating with each other. This is also present in *Holy Titclamps* with several articles about the Radical Faeries, which is a group that also combines community with activism, even as small as “Terrorist Shopping Sprees” wherein Larry-Bob and his Radical Faerie compatriots went into a Saks to shop and eventually got escorted out for acting up.²⁰³

Furthermore, this kind of collaboration was used to call readers to action, not just in terms of activism and community events, but also in terms of how they think. Issues like racism

²⁰⁰ REB and Stevec Bones. *Fanorama*, Issue #1. Providence, RI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

²⁰¹ Schmalz, Jeffrey. “MARCH FOR GAY RIGHTS; Gay Marchers Throng Mall in Appeal for Rights.” *New York Times*, April 26, 1993.

²⁰² REB. 1993. *Fanorama*, Issue #5. Providence, RI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

²⁰³ Richards, Lawrence (Larry-Bob). 1989. *Holy Titclamps*, Issue #2. Minneapolis, MN. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

and sexism within the LGBTQ+ community were written about often, calling readers to question some of their inherent biases to collaborate to build a better queer community. *Fanorama* has a few examples of these calls to action. The first occurred in issue #1, in a section called “Still More on Feminism and Gay Men,” written by contributor, Chuck Williams out of Ft. Wayne, Indiana. In the piece, Williams writes about the importance of feminism to the gay community and slams gay men for not being more supportive of women’s issues. He writes, “Women-straight, lesbian, bi-sexual-have been more than willing to fight against AIDS with gay men all along. But how many men have battled, alongside women, against breast and ovarian cancer?”²⁰⁴ Williams is utilizing the space of the zines to ask other gay men to work alongside and for women, to collaborate in terms of activism for women’s issues. The second instance was in Issue #8, where REB details a long process of recognizing racism in a local gay bar, writing about it to bring awareness, suffering backlash, and continuing to fight against the anti-Black sentiments in the LGBTQ+ community. In Mirabar, a gay bar in Providence, REB found out there was an instance where three gay men of color were harassed by white gay men until they had to leave out of fear. In this section of the zine, REB calls for witnesses to come forward and talk to him about this event. He prints some of the racist responses he got to his initial call, including one from a Mirabar regular who threw the n-word around with no regard. By printing these responses, he is highlighting the ugliness of the hatred of some members of the community and is raising awareness in his readers and calling upon them to be better and proactive about building a more inclusive queer underground community. Collaboration, then, doesn’t just refer to the material elements of the queer underground zines, but also refers to the kind of collaboration that needs to happen to build community. This kind of communal collaboration is a

²⁰⁴ REB and Stevec Bones. *Fanorama*, Issue #1. Providence, RI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

proactive way that queer underground zinesters spread information and more inclusive ideals and called their readers to action. Whether those readers took up that call is something else entirely, but either way we can see that some of the queer underground zinesters were invested in collaborating with each other to build a stronger, supportive community that reflected more inclusive politics.

Community

Drawing from collaboration, the queer zine underground was clearly invested in building community. Queer underground zines only had traction because there was a community of people eager to read and consume them, which came out of a need that wasn't being fulfilled elsewhere. Duncombe comments on the kinds of communities that zines tended to address, "If community is traditionally thought of as a homogeneous group of individuals bound together by their commonality, a zine network proposes something different: a community of people linked via bonds of difference, each sharing their originality."²⁰⁵ In the queer underground zines, the community was shared by people who were ostracized from the social mainstream, due to sexuality, to politics, and to their specific interests. The zines offered a place for queer people to attain another form of news, a news that was geared toward this community of outsiders who didn't fit in to the norm. The LGBTQ+ zines also utilized the Queer Disgust Aesthetic as a way to shock away more mainstream and heterosexual readers and to lure in budding members of the queer underground community. Duncombe continues, "The loneliness that zinesters are striving to overcome through their zines doesn't arise from physical isolation as much as it does from their social alienation. Through their zines, writers are trying to escape the society they feel alienated from while creating a new, albeit virtual, community of friends they can feel connected

²⁰⁵ Duncombe, Stephen. *Notes from Underground: Zines and The Politics of Alternative Culture*. Portland, OR: Microcosm Publishing, 2017, 58.

to.”²⁰⁶ This element of zines makes them perfect for queer underground communities, as the loneliness and alienation created from being a queer person pushed many of these members towards the margins, and thus there was a significant need to form community through other avenues, and queer underground zines were one of those avenues.

The community building element of the queer underground zines was especially strong, as it provided a system of communication that many queer folks may not have had. This resulted in many queer underground zines having very populated letter-to-the-editor sections, as well as personals sections where readers would write in to look for companionship, sex, dirty pictures, pen pals and more. Almost all of these queer underground zines incorporated letters that have been written in to be published, including some that are as simple as looking for a queer community when moving to a new city, queer pen pals, and others that are specifically asking for readers to send pornographic material, some of which were written by inmates in Alabama, California, etc. One contributor to the “Queer GRRRL” issue of *Fanorama*, wrote about the importance of building up a community for herself in a piece titled “Where are you sisters? Invisibility is Our Responsibility”:

I don’t do this for straight people. Most of them don’t know what the pink triangle even means. Most of them couldn’t care less that my girlfriend and I are totally in love or having a fight on the street. Most of them don’t notice us not matter what we do. I do what I do to reach other lesbians. I do what I do because I don’t want lesbians to assume I’m a straight girl. I am **out** all the time, everywhere, because I WANT TO REACH YOU.²⁰⁷

Here, we can see that the author is reaching out for more community, for more lesbians to become visible for each other. The queer underground zines were one avenue of being more visible to each other, building a community of peers across state lines and learning about queer

²⁰⁶ Duncombe, Stephen. *Notes from Underground: Zines and The Politics of Alternative Culture*. Portland, OR: Microcosm Publishing, 2017, 52.

²⁰⁷ REB. 1993. *Fanorama*, Issue #7. Providence, RI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

history over time. However, community was also expressed in terms of inclusivity and education within the queer underground zines.

While I have already discussed how the queer underground zines called for collaboration within the community to fight back against bias and hatred, another way the zinesters did this was by providing information and the tools to encourage a critical outlook. Not all of the queer zinesters had perfectly progressive ideas, but the zines provided a space for these discussions to happen, and oftentimes creators would start the conversation by including information in the zines. For example, in *Penetrated Pork* #1, there is a large spread focused on the issue of Nazism and white supremacy, with images of swastikas being crushed and text making it clear that the creator is against these sentiments and that the community should also reject these ideas and instead usher in more inclusivity in the LGBTQ+ community.²⁰⁸ *Fanorama* #1 also addressed the issue of white supremacy, including the factoid, “40% of Louisianans voted for a nazi, white supremacist for governor. He lost...this time,” in a section titled “AmeriKKKa.”²⁰⁹ These included criticisms made it clear that the zine creators did not stand with the parts of the LGBTQ+ community that align with white supremacy or Nazism, and by sharing these critiques they were carving out their own goals for the queer underground community to be more inclusive. Another topic that many of the queer underground zines took issue with was transphobia. Also in *Penetrated Pork* #1, an article called “Transphobia: A Personal Viewpoint” discussed the murder of Brandon Teena and transphobia in the queer community. The author writes:

The reality of our situation is this, that we are unwanted in both the straight and gay communities. The addition of the word “transgendered” to gay and straight mission

²⁰⁸ Page, J  an Paul. 1995. *Penetrated Pork*, Issue #1. Athens, GA. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

²⁰⁹ REB and Stevec Bones. *Fanorama*, Issue #1. Providence, RI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

statements is just a sop to a vocal, but basically powerless community. The word inclusion is politically correct, but does not a single thing to either change the opinions [sic] or attitudes of those who truly do not wish us included in their efforts to affect change for their kind.²¹⁰

Including this piece and this critique against the LGBTQ+ community, the zine and creator Jean Paul Page is taking a stand against transphobia and is attempting to inform readers about how hurtful and hateful some of these transphobic ideas and transgressions can be. The queer underground zines tended towards inclusivity, regardless of what the larger LGBTQ+ community stood for, and issues of white supremacy and transphobia were only some of the issues raised. *Holy Titclamps* #15 had a specifically anti-fatphobic angle, including criticisms of thin beauty standards within the queer community, and an ad for “International No Diet Day.”²¹¹ These kinds of informative elements of the zines were helpful in not only educating the queer underground community about the nuances of these problematic and biased belief systems, but also worked to break down the standard societal ideas about marginalized groups.

When it comes to education, though, the queer underground zines were especially invested in making information accessible, namely, information that could help queer communities. Access to information was not a given during the 1980s and 1990s, and queer folks in general didn’t have as many resources to turn to for help or education, and queer zines stepped in as one possible avenue. While the main goal of the zines may be to connect and to entertain, the queer underground zines regularly included very helpful and necessary information. One zine included a lot of really important information about AIDS, from the perspective of someone working for the AmeriCorps program at the Birmingham AIDS Outreach. Jean Paul Page,

²¹⁰ Page, Jean Paul. 1995. *Penetrated Pork*, Issue #1. Athens, GA. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

²¹¹ Richards, Lawrence (Larry-Bob). *Holy Titclamps*, Issue #15. SF, CA. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

creator of *Penetrated Pork*, used his experience to inform his audience of how to be more aware of AIDS symptoms and how to take care of someone with AIDS. In the first issue, Page not only included an entire spread of collaged diagrams of bodies alongside lists of potential symptoms of AIDS, but he also included a Living Will Declaration form that readers could fill out and tear out to use. Providing these resources to community members was deeply important, as we can assume many readers may not have had those resources available to them without risking their own safety.²¹² In Issue #2, Page included a list that would help caretakers and people suffering from AIDS recognize when the body is preparing for death, as well as tips on how to handle witnessing death for any survivors.²¹³ Many of the zines had similar sections that were intended to inform, while also carrying over the collage aesthetics. In *Dry Pocket to Piss in*, there were a number of informative pages, including self-defense tips (Figure 12), diagrams and directions on how to self-examine for breast and testicular cancer, as well as anti-rape resources for men.²¹⁴ In *Lil' Hustler*, informative letters were shared about different regional adult bookstores and how safe they were for sex work.²¹⁵ In *Fanorama*, there were images and directions for how to use a condom and encouragements like "Safe sex is hot sex!"²¹⁶ The "Queer GRRRL" issue of *Fanorama* also included a number of informative spreads including; information about eating disorders and the mainstream media's focus on female beauty and thinness; statistics about

²¹² Page, Jean Paul. 1995. *Penetrated Pork*, Issue #1. Athens, GA. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

²¹³ Page, Jean Paul. 1996. *Penetrated Pork*, Issue #2. Birmingham, AL. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

²¹⁴ Bones, Stevec. 1992. *Dry Pocket to Piss in*, Issue #1. Richmond, IN. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

²¹⁵ *Lil' Hustler*. 1995. Raleigh, NC. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

²¹⁶ REB and Stevec Bones. *Fanorama*, Issue #1. Providence, RI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

breast cancer and racial inequities of breast cancer treatment; resources and information about homelessness and homophobia in schools and how to protect queer youth, etc.²¹⁷

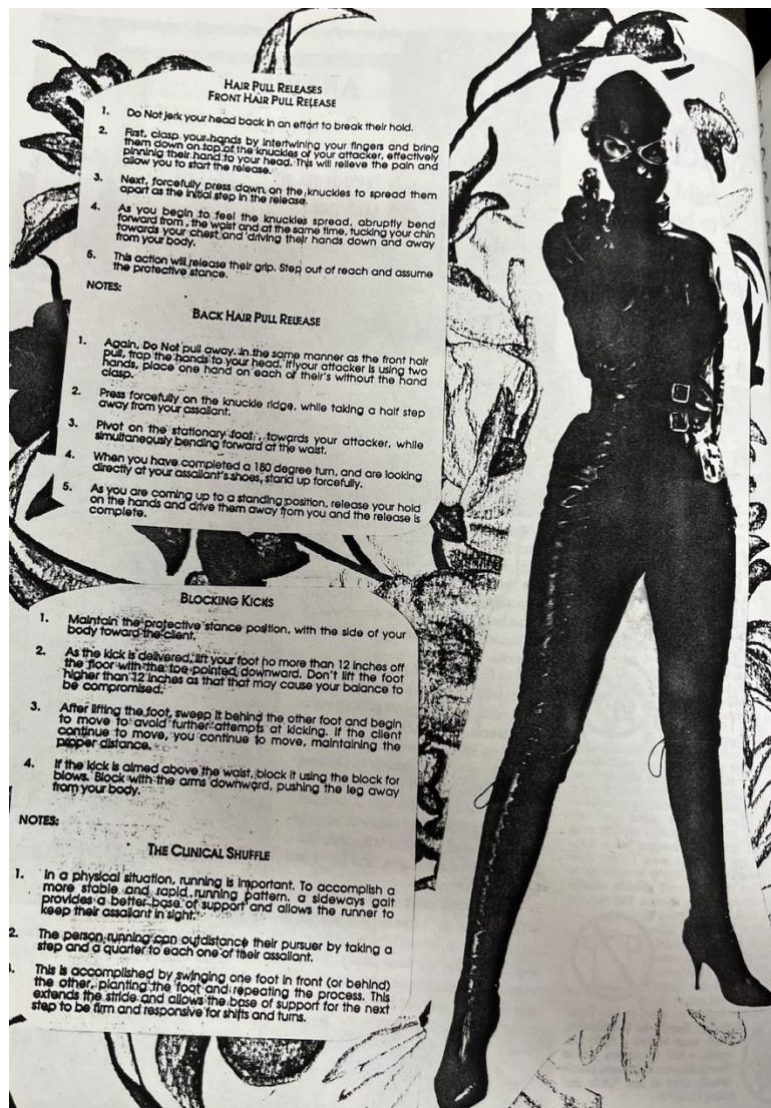


Figure 12: Self-Defense tips, *Dry Pocket to Piss In*

The plethora of information available in the queer underground zines is a clear investment in queer community, as it is attempting to provide and be a resource for information that LGBTQ+ folks may not be able to access or find elsewhere. These zines took on this informal, educational tone to spread information and tools to members of the LGBTQ

²¹⁷ REB. 1993. *Fanorama*, Issue #7. Providence, RI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

community across the country. The queer underground zinesters were keenly aware of what their community needed because they themselves needed the same information, and their contribution was sharing the information and providing resources to LGBTQ+ members that were in need. Now that we have explored overlap between the queer underground film movement and the LGBTQ+ zines, we can take them to be representative of the sensibilities and characteristics present in the movement. By drawing these connections, I argue that the LGBTQ+ zines are one of the main pathways for the sentiments and shared sensibilities of the queer underground film movement to take root not just in the larger queer underground community, but also across the United States. We can now move on to mapping out the spread of the LGBTQ+ zines to see how and where the characteristics of the queer underground film movement spread throughout the country in the 1980s and 1990s by way of the zines.

Mapping the Queer Zine Underground

Despite all of these representations and overlapping sentiments of the queer underground film movement in these queer zines, one of the zines is particularly helpful in mapping out a queer zine underground, and that was the *Holy Titclamps* zine and its segment titled “The Queer Zine Explosion.” In the early years of the zine, this may have just been the inclusion of a small ad or mailing list for other queer zines, including Alison Bechdel’s *Dykes to Watch out For*. The first issue it occurred in was in 1989, and there were only 5 names on the list. The number grew to 14 in the March 1990 issue, then another eight in the Summer 1990 issue, and then a huge jump to 141 titles listed in the 1992 issue. These ads worked to open up the world of zines to folks that may have just picked up one, and it became a point of interest for this zine in particular. As the years went on, Larry-Bob became more serious about collecting a list of queer zines, which would take the form of “The Queer Zine Explosion.” At first this would just be a

page in the back of the issue, and the font would get smaller and smaller as more zines were added to the list. However, in Issue #10 from 1992, author Larry-Bob dedicates 12 of the center pages to “The Queer Zine Explosion” and lists all of the in-print queer zines, including some descriptive information, cost, and address to subscribe. Eventually, this became a zine of its own, which was a remarkable resource to anyone trying to find more ways to get invested in the queer community. In 1993, Larry-Bob published *The Queer Zine Explosion* #7, which I was also able to access. These zines were shorter than his regular *Holy Titclamps* issues, but they listed even more zines that were running, and also included some terminology, resources, and even a “Zine Primer.” In this section, Larry-Bob includes the pronunciation of “zine,” as well as general zine etiquette, like “Don’t use the zine name on the envelope if it has words in it you wouldn’t say to your grandma,” which was helpful considering many of the names of zines and the longstanding danger of sending “obscene” material through the postal system.²¹⁸

Furthermore, in addition to *Holy Titclamps* and *The Queer Zine Explosion*, there is also an ever-growing online archive of queer zines, the Queer Zine Archive Project (archive.qzap.org). This archival project was founded in 2003 and is dedicated to collecting queer zines and making them available via scans for the public. Their mission statement is a clear reflection of the community building that many zinesters are invested in:

The mission of the Queer Zine Archive Project (QZAP) is to establish a "living history" archive of past and present queer zines and to encourage current and emerging zine publishers to continue to create. In curating such a unique aspect of culture, we value a collectivist approach that respects the diversity of experiences that fall under the heading "queer."

The primary function of QZAP is to provide a free on-line searchable database of the collection with links allowing users to view or download electronic copies of zines.

²¹⁸ Richards, Laurence (Larry-bob). 1993. *Queer Zine Explosion*, Issue #7. SF, CA: Larry-bob. Print.

By providing access to the historical canon of queer zines we hope to make them more accessible to diverse communities and reach wider audiences.²¹⁹

QZAP is a community-invested archive that really aims towards making zines available for all interested parties, and a great deal of work has been done by the team and interns to tag and code zines with workable search terms. Also, many zine creators have sent in their zines themselves in order for there to be a more long-lasting record of their work. The archive has zines spanning over five decades, many of them with complete scans of issues for users to flip through from their homes. There are options to search by people, places, centuries, decades, years, collections, creators, and more. For this research, QZAP was helpful in extending my research and finding more zines that existed in the margins and middle of the country.²²⁰

In these collections and resources, it is again possible to map out a more nuanced community of the queer underground, connected through the postal service (Figure 13). This list of queer zines includes zines being made in states across the nation, but also a number of zines from countries like Canada, France, Greece, the UK, and Ireland. In Figure 13, I have highlighted states that were included in this list of queer zines, including surprising sources, like Texas, Tennessee, Kansas, and more. Furthermore, while there may not have been zines coming out of some states, there is a very strong likelihood that they were being sent into queer folks in those states. For example, in *Fanorama* #8, a queer zine that was regularly published out of Providence, RI, there was an Alaskan writer who asked the creator to send some issues of

²¹⁹ “About the Archive.” QZAP. QZAP.org. Accessed January 28, 2023.
<https://archive.qzap.org/index.php/About/Index>.

²²⁰ QZAP also helped with my research at the Michigan State University Special Collections, wherein there is a significant collection of American queer zines spanning from the 1980s through the 2000s. In the Special Collections, I was able to gain access to a number of issues of *Holy Titclamps*, but I was also able to look at zines like *Penetrated Pork* [sic], *Homocore*, *Abrupt Lane Edge*, *Query*, and more. In this collection, many of these zines also included small sections to advertise other, more regional zines, which added a number of zines to the compiled list that we used to create the map below. And in some cases, where the zines did not have clear issue number and year information, QZAP was a reliable resource to find that information if they had the same zine in their collection.

Fanorama to a friend in prison, who had been kicked out by his Southern Baptist parents at a young age.²²¹ Not only is this one of the states that did not have a queer zine listed in “The Queer Zine Explosion,” or QZAP, but also it shines light on a population within the queer community that tends to get overlooked – the imprisoned. In *Holy Titclamps* #5 there was a letter from a gay man in a NY State prison as well, and this happened a number of times throughout the *Holy Titclamp* issues I was able to access. Furthermore, in *Queer Zine Explosion*, there is a note that all imprisoned people can get *Holy Titclamps* and *Queer Zine Explosion* for free, which enabled this overlooked queer population to connect via zines. While this map gives us a much more expanded notion of the queer underground and where it takes place, it also primarily represents where the zines were coming from and through letters and other mailed-in contributions, we can assume that they were being sent out to even more states than are highlighted here.

²²¹ REB. 1994. *Fanorama*, Issue #8. Providence, RI. Print.

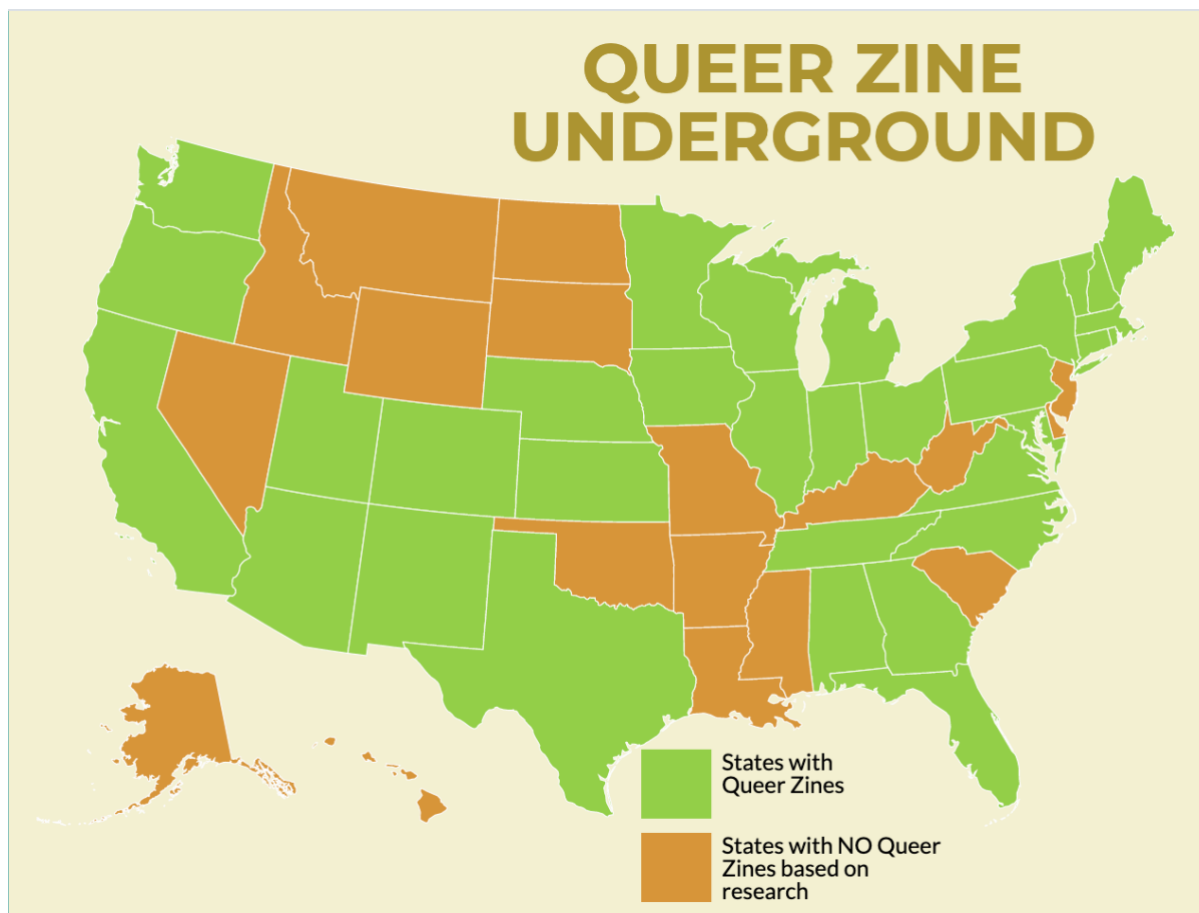


Figure 13: Map and table of Queer Zine community

<u>State</u>	<u>Queer Zines</u> ²²²
	* = MSU Special Collections + = <i>Holy Titclamps</i> “ = <i>Queer Zine Explosion</i> #7 (QZAP) = Queer Zine Archive Project
Washington	<i>Artistic Licentiousness</i> +”, <i>The Desert Peach</i> +”, <i>Ecce Queer</i> +”*, <i>Future Shocks</i> +”, <i>Girl Germs</i> +”, <i>Naughty Bits</i> +”, <i>Primal Scream</i> +, <i>Real Girl</i> +”, <i>Bikini Kill</i> “, <i>BVI Central</i> “, <i>Vent</i> “, <i>Teen Fag</i> (QZAP)
Oregon	<i>Lana’s World</i> + (moved to CA eventually), <i>A Rage of Maidens</i> +

²²² All zines have been sourced from either Michigan State University Special Collections, the Queer Zine Archive (archive.qzap.org), within the *Holy Titclamps* “Queer Zine Explosion” segment, or the *Queer Zine Explosion* Issue #7 (1993).

Figure 13 (cont'd)

<u>State</u>	<u>Queer Zines</u> ²²³ * = MSU Special Collections + = <i>Holy Titclamps</i> “ = <i>Queer Zine Explosion #7</i> (QZAP) = Queer Zine Archive Project
California	<i>Homocore</i> *+, <i>Fertile LaToyah Jackson Magazine</i> +, <i>On Our Backs</i> +, <i>Adversary</i> +, <i>Agony</i> +, <i>Anything that Moves</i> +, <i>Barbara's Psychic Anus</i> +, <i>Better Homos and Gardens</i> +, <i>Boy with a Gun</i> +, <i>Brains</i> +, <i>Brat Attack</i> +, <i>Carrie</i> +, <i>Chainsaw</i> +, <i>The Cherotic Revolutionary</i> +, <i>Cultrix</i> +, <i>Cunt/Prick</i> +, <i>Dear World</i> +, <i>Debbie & Dan's Queer Brunch</i> +, <i>Diseased Pariah News</i> +, <i>Dragazine</i> +, <i>Drew Blood Press</i> +, <i>Dyke Review</i> +, <i>Fagazine</i> +, <i>Faggot</i> +, <i>Foetus Acid</i> +, <i>For Your Skull</i> +, <i>Fraktured Faerie Tales</i> +, <i>Frighten the Horses</i> +, <i>Gay Comics</i> +, <i>Gay Skinhead Movement</i> +, <i>Girl Jock</i> +, <i>Hangy Thing</i> +, <i>Healing Tales</i> +, <i>Hold the Pickle</i> +, <i>Homoture</i> +, <i>Homozone</i> +, <i>Horny Biker Sluts</i> +, <i>Inciting Desire</i> +, <i>Infected Faggot Perspectives</i> +, <i>Intent to Kill</i> +, <i>IQ</i> +, <i>Lavender Godzilla</i> +, <i>Logomotive</i> +, <i>Meandyke</i> +, <i>Mudflap</i> +, <i>On Our Rag</i> +, <i>Piss Elegant</i> +, <i>Public Enema</i> +, <i>Queer City</i> +, <i>Queer Stories</i> +, <i>Riot Gear</i> +, <i>Rotortiller Hausjunge</i> +, <i>RUH Roh!</i> +, <i>Scream Box</i> +, <i>Shadowtown</i> +, <i>SHRIMP</i> +, <i>Sin Bros</i> +, <i>Sing Along with Geko</i> +, <i>Sister Nobody</i> +, <i>Slutburger Stories</i> +, <i>Su Madre</i> +, <i>Tang</i> +, <i>Tantrum</i> +, <i>Taste of Latex</i> +, <i>Teen Punks in Heat</i> + (Prev in Illinois), <i>Up Our Butts</i> +, <i>Venus Castina</i> +, <i>Whispering Campaign</i> +, <i>Whorezine</i> +, <i>Zack</i> +, <i>Bicycle Threat</i> “ (changes title each issue – was <i>Alphabet Threat</i>), <i>Children of the Void</i> ”, <i>Ciao</i> ”, <i>Fembot</i> ”, <i>HER</i> ”, <i>Hippie Dick</i> *”, <i>Hot Lava Monster</i> ”, <i>Mirage</i> ”, <i>Oi Boy!</i> ”, <i>Outpunk</i> ”, <i>Rocketdyke</i> ”, <i>Sexy</i> ”, <i>She-male Trouble</i> ”, <i>Silver Balls</i> ”, <i>Spiral</i> ”, <i>Steppinstone</i> ”, <i>Suck don't Blow</i> ”, <i>Thorn</i> ”, <i>Three Dollar Bill</i> ”, <i>Turbo Queer</i> ”, <i>The Unmentionables</i> ”, <i>Yes, Ms. Davis</i> ”
Utah	<i>Paper Toadstool</i> +, <i>Queer Fuckers Magazine</i> +, <i>Salt and Sage</i> +
Arizona	<i>New Uranian</i> +
Colorado	<i>The Overground</i> +, <i>SPEW</i> +
New Mexico	<i>Reality Check</i> +
Nebraska	<i>Lincoln Bulletin #98</i> +, <i>DWAN</i> “
Kansas	<i>Factsheet Five</i> + (Prev in New York)
Iowa	<i>Judy</i> (QZAP)
Texas	<i>Crooked Smile – Cracked Lips</i> +, <i>The Spot</i> +, <i>Two Nice Girls Songbooks</i> +, <i>Vanilla Milkshake</i> +, <i>Positron</i> “
Minnesota	<i>Art police</i> +, <i>Dykes to Watch Out For</i> +, <i>Baby Split Bowling News</i> +, <i>Bundle of Sticks</i> *+, <i>Demure Butchness</i> +, <i>Dolo Romy</i> +, <i>Hot Dog</i> +, <i>James White Review</i> +, <i>New Puritan Review</i> +, <i>The nighttime, sniffing, sneezing, coughing, aching, stuffy-head, fever, so you can rest zine</i> +, <i>No External Compulsion</i> +, <i>Not Your Bastard</i> +, <i>Not Your Bitch</i> +, <i>Oubliette</i> +, <i>Strange Looking Exile</i> +, <i>Three Twenty-Seven</i> +, <i>Uffda Fee M'Golly Wow</i> +, <i>3,000 Eyes Are Watching Me</i> ”, <i>Artflux</i> ”, <i>Death or Glory/Twist</i> ”, <i>The Esther Rabinowitz Guide to Life</i> ”, <i>Swerve</i> ”, <i>Yeah, But Is It Safe Sex?</i> ”, <i>Abrupt Lane Edge</i> * (Prev in Michigan)
Wisconsin	<i>Butt Ugly</i> +, <i>The Apa That Dares Now Speak Its Name</i> +, <i>Fuh Cole</i> “

²²³ All zines have been sourced from either Michigan State University Special Collections, the Queer Zine Archive (archive.qzap.org), within the *Holy Titclamps* “Queer Zine Explosion” segment, or the *Queer Zine Explosion* Issue #7 (1993).

Figure 13 (cont'd)

State	Queer Zines ²²⁴
	* = MSU Special Collections + = <i>Holy Titclamps</i> “ = <i>Queer Zine Explosion</i> #7 (QZAP) = Queer Zine Archive Project
Illinois	<i>The Gentlewomen of California</i> *, <i>Teen Punks in Heat</i> +, <i>Carnifex Network</i> +, <i>Homo Patrol Comics</i> +”, <i>Hot Lip</i> +”, <i>Negativa</i> +”, <i>Thing</i> +”, <i>APA-Lambda</i> ”, <i>Hot Wire</i> ”, <i>Mala Leche</i> ” (Spanish), <i>PC Casualties</i> ”, <i>Siren</i> ”
Michigan	<i>Babyfish</i> #3 +, <i>Baker Street</i> +”, <i>Feedback</i> +”, <i>PC Casualties</i> +, <i>Queer Magnolia</i> *+, <i>Queer in MLPS</i> *, <i>Abrupt Lane Edge</i> *, <i>Query</i> *, <i>Montgomery Clift was Queer</i> *
Indiana	<i>ETC</i> +”, <i>Zugang</i> +, <i>Fanorama</i> *” (moved to RI), <i>Dry Pocket to Piss in</i> *, <i>Griselda: A Zine of Woman’s Rage</i> (ad in <i>Dry Pocket to Piss In</i>), <i>Dead Molly for Bitches</i> (ad in <i>Dry Pocket to Piss In</i>)
Tennessee	<i>RFD</i> +”, <i>Stumblings</i> +”, <i>Northstar</i> +
Alabama	<i>Penetrated Pork</i> * (Prev in Georgia)
Ohio	<i>Notes From the Floorboards</i> +, <i>Fucktooth</i> +”, <i>Rotten Fruit</i> “, <i>Wiglet</i> “, <i>FaGaGaGa</i> (ad in <i>Fanorama</i> #1)
Georgia	<i>Penetrated Pork</i> *,
Florida	<i>Este No Tiene Nombre</i> “, <i>Testosterone Junky</i> (QZAP), <i>U.S. Kweer Corps</i> (QZAP)
Maine	<i>Gaybee</i> +”, <i>Mektoub</i> “
New Hampshire	<i>Rollerderby</i> “, <i>Fishwrapper</i> “
Vermont	<i>Strangeway Almanac</i> “
New York	<i>AQUA</i> (<i>Anarca Queers Undermining Authority</i>) +, <i>My Comrade</i> +”, <i>Outweek</i> +, <i>Factsheet Five</i> +, <i>Dragnett</i> +”, <i>Evil</i> *+”, <i>Farm</i> +”, <i>Hissy Fit</i> +”, <i>Pansy Beat</i> +, <i>Portable Lower East Side</i> +, <i>Punk Beat</i> +, <i>Pussy Grazer</i> +”, <i>Slut Mag</i> +”, <i>Straight to Hell</i> +, <i>TED</i> +, <i>Dead Jackie Susann Quarterly</i> ”, <i>Spawn of Satan</i> ”, <i>Susan Mini Mag</i> +, <i>Word</i> ”
Massachusetts	<i>Rock Against Sexism</i> +”, <i>Deepsix Superstition</i> +”, <i>Dogfish Head Poetry Magazine</i> +, <i>High School Fag</i> +”, <i>PMS</i> +”, <i>Backspace</i> *, <i>Axilos</i> ”, <i>Bi Girl World</i> ”, <i>Bitch Queen</i> ”, <i>Girl Fiend</i> ”, <i>Guerita</i> ”, <i>I am</i> ”, <i>Mousie</i> ”, <i>Oompa! Oompa!</i> ”, <i>Today’s Transvestite</i> ”
Connecticut	<i>Big Dick Worship</i> #6 +, <i>Hothead Paisan</i> +”, <i>Strange Looking Exile</i> “
Rhode Island	<i>Fanorama</i> *
Pennsylvania	<i>Poesflesh</i> +”, <i>Queer Intercourse</i> +”, <i>Stage Whisper</i> +”, <i>Popular Sodomy</i> ”, <i>Semiprecious</i> ”
Maryland	<i>The Adventure of Baby Dyke</i> +”, <i>Faker</i> “
Washington D.C.	<i>Bikini Kill</i> +, <i>Jigsaw</i> +”, <i>Chainsaw</i> “, <i>Sister Nobody</i> “
Virginia	<i>Fantastic Fanzine</i> “
North Carolina	<i>Lil’ Hustler</i> *, <i>Nocturnal Emissions</i> +”, <i>Smeg Dog</i> (QZAP)

²²⁴ All zines have been sourced from either Michigan State University Special Collections, the Queer Zine Archive (archive.qzap.org), within the *Holy Titclamps* “Queer Zine Explosion” segment, or the *Queer Zine Explosion* Issue #7 (1993).

In looking at both of these maps – the one created with Kuchar’s travels, and the one built from LGBTQ+ zine circulation – we can see there are some blank spots in the northern Rocky Mountain states, as well as the Southeastern/Gulf states, but there is a prominent band of community spots spanning the Midwest and pooling a bit more heavily towards the coasts. While the coastal pooling isn’t surprising and does re-entrench the necessity of investigating those specific localized communities, looking at the queer underground as an expansive map of communication and travel provides more opportunities to explore these communities across America. This representation of the queer underground disrupts some of the more stagnant focus on a specific set of years and locale and allows for a more broad understanding of the long-term flow of ideas and sentiments of a queer underground. The zines in particular are able to show how many of the sentiments and ideas drawn out from the queer underground film movement took root within the large queer underground and were passed on over time, in part through these zines. Furthermore, the map presents a much different picture of a queer underground community than what much representation, research and general discussion tends to assume. While we all may know that, of course there are queer people within every community across the world, these zines can show just how these people and communities could share ideas and commentary and art, even if they were the only queer person they knew in their small, rural town. This map and the pathways of these queer zines are proof of a queer resilience and an enduring reaching-outwards for a community of like-minded, queer troublemakers that populated the queer underground community.

Institutional Overlapping: LGBTQ+ Zines and Academia

One of the surprising overlaps that occur within both maps and resources is that of an overlap with academic institutions and communities. While with Kuchar’s map in Chapter 1, the

overlap with academic institutions is expected, considering how often he traveled for screenings and workshops at other institutions. However, there is a similar overlap with the LGBTQ+ zines map, wherein zines are coming out of states like Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, where universities like University of Wisconsin, Madison, University of Michigan, Michigan State University, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, etc. are located. Many of these places were not only home to significant academic institutions, but they also are areas where underground film festivals and screenings occur quite regularly. Michigan had the Ann Arbor Film Festival since 1963; Chicago not only had screenings at the Art Institute, but the Video Data Bank, a contemporary video art distributor, was founded at the school in 1976²²⁵, and later in 1993 the Chicago Underground Film Festival was formed²²⁶; in Wisconsin, the Milwaukee Underground Film Festival wasn't founded until 2003, but University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee is home to the Union Cinema, an art house theater that hosts weekly experimental screenings²²⁷, and the University of Wisconsin, Madison has had a significant film program that was created in 1960.²²⁸ These overlaps suggest shared, and growing communities of interested learners and viewers that coalesce in areas that may be more welcoming to particular threads of social and political criticism. While the zines tended to be anti-institutional in their rejection of publication standards, as evidenced in the shamelessly amateur aesthetics section, the overlapping present in the map shows that there are shared sentiments and investments with members of academic institutions and the communities that thrive in these spaces.

²²⁵ "About VDB." Video Data Bank. Accessed March 22, 2023.

²²⁶ Bliznick, Jay, and Bryan Wendorf. "Chicago Underground Film Festival." FilmFreeway. Accessed March 22, 2023.

²²⁷ "Festivals & Screenings - UW-Milwaukee Peck School of the Arts." Peck School of the Arts, June 10, 2021.

²²⁸ "Our History." Department of Communication Arts. Accessed March 22, 2023.

Within the LGBTQ+ zines, there are also several examples of people and ideas that were invested in both queer underground sentiments and higher academia. In *Holy Titclamps* #4 from March 1990, there are submitted comics from Michelle Rau about different types of academic support staff she has encountered, as well as different types of faculty at her university in Oregon.²²⁹ Rau was not just a student, and eventual graduate student, she also published her long-running comic zine, *Lana's World* from 1989 through 1992, and contributed to zines like *Strange Looking Exile* and the *Girljock* magazine. Furthermore, Rau wrote one of the earlier articles on the history of zines, titled "From APA to Zines: Towards a History of Zines."²³⁰ Furthermore, in *Fanorama* #5, creator REB (Richard Bump) writes about how he was invited to John Hopkins University to speak on a panel about queer zines. In this same issue, there are reprinted posters for the event REB was attending, as well as the SPEW 2.5 Queer Zine Explosion, which was also being held at John Hopkins. Lastly, the issue included a flyer for a Queer Power Picnic that was being held at Brown University.²³¹ These examples show that these two communities have become somewhat entangled, and that being legitimized by academic institutions may have helped some of these queer zines and queer creators to spread their messages further. The shared spaces within academic institutions may be one potential meeting ground where the characteristics of the queer underground film movement and the larger queer underground community were able to be discussed and shared without repercussion.

While the zines were quite anti-intellectual in their rebellion against publication standards, there are also several examples where they borrow and/or poke fun at the language of the academic. One example was created by Miss Spentyouth, out of Iowa City, Iowa – titled

²²⁹ Richards, Laurence (Larry-bob). 1990. *Holy Titclamps*, Issue #4. Minneapolis, MN: Larry-bob. Print.

²³⁰ Rau, Michelle. "From APA to Zines: Towards a History of Zines." *Alternative Press Review*, 1994, 10-13.

²³¹ REB. 1993. *Fanorama*, Issue #5. Providence, RI. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

Judy. In *Judy* #2, there is a plethora of references to Judith Butler, starting with a thank you note on the first page; “Thanks to all my friends (and other people I met in dangerous underground theory bars) who were willing to share their gossip & the heady exploits of famous academics they sort of knew at their old colleges.”²³² Miss Spentyouth is an alias for Andrea Lawlor-Mariano, who at the time was an undergraduate student at University of Iowa, and who has “a heart tattoo with the initials J.B. in another secret place,” also in reference to Judith Butler.²³³ The content is playful though, in that as much as Judith Butler’s name is mentioned, there are also other Judy’s included, like Judy Garland. A similar playfulness is utilized with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Warhol favorite, Edie Sedgwick, where the academic gets wound up in pop culture references. However, there is some contention, in this issue, Miss Spentyouth reprinted an article by Larissa MacFarquhar, “Putting the Camp back in Campus,” where she discussed *Judy*, Issue #1, and got quotes from Judith Butler about the zine. Butler took the time to respond, not only in writing, which was also reprinted in the issue, but also via a phone call to Miss Spentyouth. Butler did not approve, saying “I wish it hasn’t happened...It draws attention away from my work and puts it on my person, and I would much rather have people pay attention to my work.”²³⁴ But this clearly did not faze Miss Spentyouth, as she reprinted all of this material with jokey comments and her conversation with Butler on the phone, including her explanation of the zine as, “a critique of, um, a ‘queer’ obsession with and consumption of, um, celebrity.” Throughout the issue, there are references to being ABD (all but dissertation), to MLA (Modern Language Association), as well as a submitted piece on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak by a college student in New York, who had met Spivak while she was a teaching fellow

²³² Miss Spentyouth. 1994. *Judy*, Issue #2. Iowa City, IA. Queer Zine Archive Project Web Site.

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

at the university they attended. Further, there is a parodic piece written in the voice of Camilla Paglia in response to Butler's *Gender Trouble*, as well as a petition to mail into Routledge Press to include a picture of Butler on the back of her books. This zine is one that is clearly playing in the overlap between queer underground communities and the academic institutional communities and utilizing a queer humor to poke fun at what so many of us take so seriously.

Another key example is the zine called *Brains: The Journal of Egghead Sexuality*²³⁵, which is focused more on academic communities in the San Francisco area. *Brains* is a treasure trove of academic content, with a spread of a bathing graduate student from University of Texas, Austin, gracing the middle section. One of the submitted letters mentions San Francisco State University and writes about "university boys," as well as a number of references towards academics throughout. There is a BrainSyllabus included, mentions of Bataille, Nietzsche, Foucault, and more, sprinkled with more erotic content, like images of men hooking up in a library, detailed personals and more. Much like *Judy*, there is a keen awareness of academic culture and celebrities, and there is such a deep knowledge that it is easy to parody and poke fun at the academic community, while also clearly being a part of it. There is a sexualizing of intellectualism as well as a parodying of it, which is clear in the back page of the zine. In Figure 14, there is a realistic picture of the brain, potentially taken from underneath, as opposed the most recognizable images of the brain where the profile of the brain is shown. In this presentation of the brain, there is a clear center, which mimics an orifice, like that of a mouth or

²³⁵ *Brains* is a zine out of San Francisco, CA, published by B. Works. The one issue I had access to was from 1990, and it appears to be the only issue. Authors are D-L Alvarez and Nayland Blake.

an anus, which seems to be an attempt to sexualize the brain in line with the theme of the zine as a whole.²³⁶

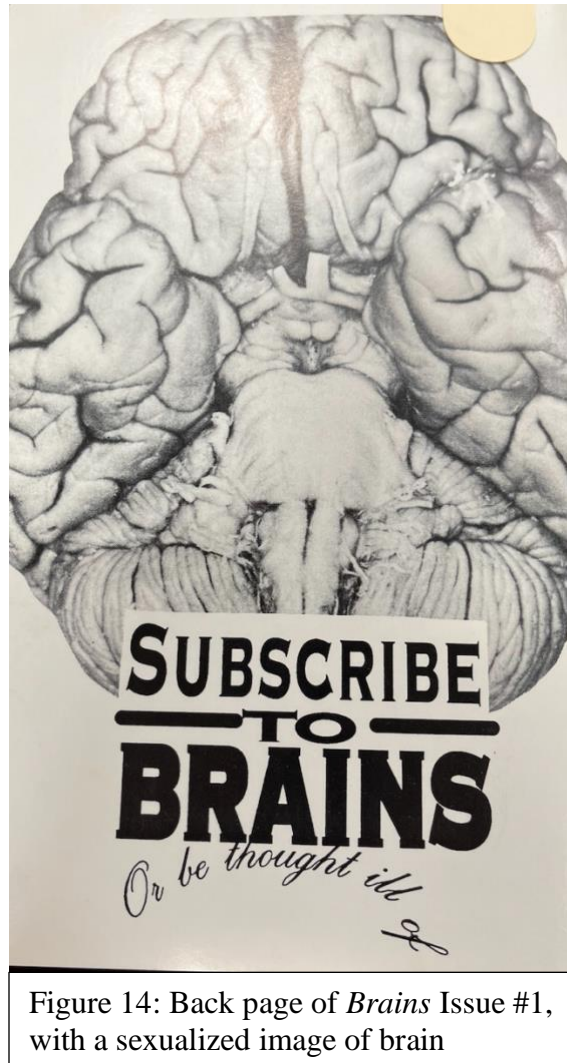


Figure 14: Back page of *Brains* Issue #1, with a sexualized image of brain

The spread and infiltration of queer underground energy and information is present in the map, and the overlaps with Kuchar's queer underground as well as academic institutions shows that the characteristics of the queer underground film movement spread beyond its initial boom - not just over space but also over time. Filmmakers and creators like Kuchar spread these ideas with the communities they shared throughout the country, and zinesters spread the ideas even further over time and more space. In these maps, we can see that one potential space wherein

²³⁶ *Brains: The Journal of Egghead Sexuality*, Issue #1. 1990. San Francisco, CA. Michigan State University Special Collections. Print.

these ideas could be shared is academic institutions, both through film screenings and the audiences and students that attended them. The academic institutions served as havens, at times, for queer underground creators, both in film and in zines.

Conclusion

The queer underground may have come to full bloom in the NYC Underground film movement, but it took root deeply in the queer communities that found understanding, rebellion, and joy in the films. The queer underground film movement was always tethered and indebted to the larger marginalized, LGBTQ+ community, as evidenced by David E. James' claims about the forking of the NYC alternative film movement. Here, the LGBTQ+ zines represent the larger community that was formed with and around the queer underground film movement and the societal and political contestations that were present in the works. Furthermore, the zines represent the reverberations of the movement and how the sentiments and characteristics were shared following the boom, by way of the LGBTQ+ zines to new queer underground community members in the 1980s and 1990s. The LGBTQ+ mapping and the Kuchar mapping both present a much more nuanced representation of where queer underground communities exist and disrupt the plethora of narratives that put queer communities in the urban and coastal areas. To draw back to Kath Weston's "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration," the gay imaginary is a shared dream amongst LGBTQ+ folks that a "somewhere else" exists where being queer is accepted and loved, wherein the rural vs urban binary is re-entrenched as rural equaling violence and loneliness for LGBTQ+ folks, and the urban is a place of community and safety.²³⁷ And while this "imaginary" has been debunked in the sense that there are many rural queers, the mapping here is proof that there were welcoming and politically

²³⁷ Weston, Kath. "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (June 1, 1995): 253–77. doi:10.1215/10642684-2-3-253

critical queer communities throughout the country, as evidenced by the plethora of plot points throughout the midwest. The maps present a much more resilient and varied representation of the queer underground community that reject coastal and urban focuses and instead offers many more sites of respite.

One of the sites of respite that became clear in the mapping of the queer underground by way of Kuchar and the LGBTQ+ zines was that of academic institutions. For Kuchar, they showed up as destinations for many of his travels, whether it be to visit his peers, attend or present film screenings, or teach classes. For the LGBTQ+ zines, academic institutions were not only present in the content, but they also seemed to become places where zine events like SPEW took place, and they act as a repository for many zines in special collections and archives. Academic institutions, in part, aided in the resilience of the queer underground, as it offered a strong foundation and network that welcomed and validated these forms of social and political criticism. In the next chapter, we return to Kuchar and his role as a pedagogue at the San Francisco Art Institute to explore how the queer underground film movement and its characteristics were addressed, shared, and celebrated in the classroom.

CHAPTER 4:
TEACHING THE UNDERGROUND:
PEDAGOGY, PLAY & CONCEPTIONS OF THE QUEER UNDERGROUND

Introduction

“Teaching filmmaking at a large university or art college is a valuable interchange between teacher and pupil. You get a second chance at youth by feeding off the effervescence of the hell-raising horde, sucking their energy with the fangs of an academic Dracula while they try to nail you in a coffin of drug addiction and teenybopper perversions.”

- George Kuchar, *Reflections of a Cinematic Cesspool*²³⁸

An untapped element of community building within the queer underground is that of the classroom and how it has functioned to create safe spaces for interested students to play with the moving image medium, as well as an employment repository for avant-garde and underground artists. This chapter explores the overlapping between queer underground communities and college institutions that arose out of the geographical mapping, specifically through George Kuchar and Studio Kuchar at San Francisco Art Institute. Following the initial boom of the queer underground film movement in NYC, many filmmakers sought more consistent income and found positions in college institutions, and this expanded the life and community of the queer underground film movement. This prolongation was twofold, in that it introduced new generations to the film works and production styles of the queer underground, but also broadened the community by creating new invested audiences and filmmakers to explore and create films in the queer underground tradition. Furthermore, with screenings and invited guest speakers, many of these filmmakers-turned-pedagogues relied on their own networks and introduced their students to other members of the queer underground film movement. These classrooms or studio spaces could, then, be spaces for students to build their own connections and networks, tethering together their own peers and the larger queer underground community by way of their educators,

²³⁸ Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997, 43.

visiting filmmakers, etc. Kuchar is especially relevant for tracking the community building present in the studio classroom, as he held his position at SFAI for almost four decades, he traveled and taught or spoke at several other institutions during this time, and he created many films where he collaborated with his students and his queer underground community members. In this chapter, I explore how the queer underground film movement characteristics were present and flourishing in Studio Kuchar and argue that the university studio or classroom space was key in spreading said characteristics, as well as aiding in building up another generation of invested queer underground community members.

While there may be a common misconception that the liberatory and self-expressive elements of queer underground film and art would not enmesh well with the structure of college institutions, there is a long history of artistic creators finding stability within academia. Michael Zryd terms the relationship between artists and academic institutions, “A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance,” wherein “universities have supported avant-garde film production, sustained its distribution co-ops, and served as its primary site of exhibition in North America.”²³⁹ This was especially true of America, following the underground film boom of the 1960s, wherein many underground and/or queer underground filmmakers took their oftentimes self-taught expertise and went on to share them, their community networks, and more, with new and eager students. The reasoning for this shift was twofold – one being that avant-garde/experimental/underground film was receiving more popular exposure than ever, which led to film being “the fastest-growing area of arts study in American universities,” and the other, the resilient expense of filmmaking as a whole.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Zryd, Michael. 2006. “The Academy and the Avant-Garde: A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance.” *Cinema Journal* 45 (2): 17

²⁴⁰ Zryd, Michael. “Experimental Film and the Development of Film Study in America.” Article. In *Inventing Film Studies*, edited by Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, 183-4.

According to Judith E. Adler, who completed an ethnography at the California Institute of the Arts during the early 1970s by interviewing young artists that had found themselves employed in an academic setting, *Artists in Offices*, there was a distinct financial dependency upon filmmakers. She writes:

Film-making offers a good example of the dependency upon well-funded organizations which a complex and costly technology creates. A film maker working with even the cheapest and most primitive equipment will find himself - compared with a painter or a poet - involved in a highly costly art form. A garret film maker, living on thinned soup and creative enthusiasm, is unthinkable as a real possibility; the young artist fascinated by this contemporary medium requires the affluent upper-middle-class income his historical predecessor could afford to scorn.²⁴¹

The ability to work only as an experimental or underground filmmaker at this time was extremely difficult and unlikely, as the revenues for income were not varied and the amateur filmmaking styles did not endear these filmmakers to a more mainstream Hollywood filmmaking style. Therefore, many filmmakers may have been pleased to work at academic institutions where they could use the school budget to purchase technology and tools to further their own and their student's capabilities. Of course, soon after Adler's moment, the 1980s brought along the handheld camcorder, which may suggest a financial de-burdening for filmmakers, but Kuchar can be a great example here, as he was already working as an educator and made the switch to video for budgetary reasons. While film stock was becoming more and more expensive to buy and develop, Kuchar made the switch to video which allowed him to continue making fairly cheap Studio films with his students, as well as beginning his huge corpus of personal videos. However, he still needed and relied on San Francisco Art Institute for income, a budget, as well as the video editing bay that he utilized in most of his video works.²⁴² While George Kuchar took

²⁴¹ Adler, Judith E. *Artists in Offices: An Ethnography of an Academic Art Scene*. 2017 ed. London, UK: Routledge, 1979, 4.

²⁴² Lampert, Andrew. *The George Kuchar Reader*. New York, NY: Primary Information, 2014, 130, 188.

up residence in “Studio Kuchar” at SFAI in the mid-1970s, he surely was not the only artist to make this switch. A similar example can be made with Woody and Steina Vasulka, who both worked in video in the early 1970s. Woody also took an academic job at the time, in between grants, at the University of Buffalo in the Center for Media Studies, wherein he was able to continue his experimentations with the video medium and, along with Steina, creating content for the PBS Channel 17 in Buffalo.²⁴³ Without these funds and positions provided by the academy, via salaries or grants, many underground, experimental and/or avant-garde filmmakers may have quit creating, or at the least not been as productive for multiple decades.

Following the lively years of the underground in NYC, the late 60s through the 80s saw a migration of some of the key voices and names to more consistent jobs in academia. While Kuchar shifted to teaching in the mid 1970s, others made the move sooner, including Ken Jacobs, who not only started, but also taught in the Department of Cinema at Binghamton University from 1969 to 2002. Like Kuchar, Jacobs was working at Binghamton under a temporary position, but when it came time to leave, his students petitioned to have him hired, which eventually worked, and he went on to have a long teaching career that specialized “in avant garde cinema appreciation and production.”²⁴⁴ Another large name in the NYC underground, Stan Brakhage, went on to teach at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 1970 through 1981, and then at University of Colorado, Boulder as Distinguished Professor from 1981 to 2002, just a few months before his death.²⁴⁵ Jonas Mekas taught film courses at the New School for Social Research, MIT, Cooper Union, and New York University.²⁴⁶ Furthermore,

²⁴³ Albright-Knox Art Gallery. *Vasulka: Steina Machine Vision, Woody Descriptions*. Buffalo, NY: The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 1978, 34

²⁴⁴ Ken Jacobs, “Biography,” Ken Jacobs Works & Words, accessed September 2, 2022

²⁴⁵ “Brakhage.” Cinema Studies & Moving Image Arts, May 26, 2021.

²⁴⁶ “Biography.” Jonas Mekas. Accessed September 2, 2022. <https://jonasmekas.com/bio.php>.

before emigrating to Europe, Gregory Markopoulos founded the film department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1965 and taught for two years.²⁴⁷ Others like Barbara Hammer, Kenneth Anger, Carolee Schneemann, Mike Kuchar etc. have also spent time in the classroom in the years since the NYC underground. But it is also important to remember that many members of the queer underground may not have survived the time, whether it was AIDS complications, like Curt McDowell or Jack Smith, or otherwise, like Andy Warhol and Ron Rice. While we can't know whether or not these creators would have entered into academic spaces as educators, it is clear that many of the folks who were seminal members of the NYC underground took their experience and skills and brought them to new generations via the classroom space.

Additionally, the role of filmmakers and film within academic institutions has become a significant arena of study within the discipline. Since the early 2000's, there has been an increase of scholarship that investigates different film pedagogies, art and/or film schools, and film programs as a way to understand how the film discipline has been formed and taught in institutional spaces. Of course there is a wide scope of film education, that of film theory/criticism, film production, and film studies, but all of these arenas have begun to be explored by a number of key film scholars, including Dana Polan's extensive study on film instruction in higher education in the early years (1915-1935), *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film*²⁴⁸; Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson, with their edited collection *Inventing Film Studies*²⁴⁹; Michael Zryd and his numerous articles on experimental film education; Woody Vasulka and Peter Weibel and their edited collection, *Buffalo Heads:*

²⁴⁷ "Gregory Markopoulos: Eniaios II." Conversations at the Edge (CATE). Accessed September 2, 2022. <https://sites.saic.edu/cate/2011/10/30/gregory-markopoulos-eniaios-ii/>.

²⁴⁸ Polan, Dana B. *Scenes of instruction: The beginnings of the U.S. study of film*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007.

²⁴⁹ Grieveson, Lee, and Haidee Wasson. *Inventing Film Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2008.

*Media Study, Media Practice, Media Pioneers, 1973-1990*²⁵⁰; Mark Garrett Cooper and John Marx and their work in *Media U: How the Need to Win Audiences Has Shaped Higher Education*²⁵¹; etc. This subsection of the film discipline has become populated with deep studies of the inception of film studies and how the institutionalization of film as a study has bolstered and informed the trajectory of the art form on the whole. Zryd in particular has done a great deal of relevant work on the growth of film programs and film studies during the 1960s and 1970s, which is known as the “boom period” of the discipline, as well on the use of experimental film in education. He provides a foundation of history wherein academic institutions were highly important in the longevity of experimental and/or underground film distributors, as well as how the surrounding culture and exposure of these kinds of films led to an explosion of student-led film societies, which in turn led to the adoption and creation of larger film studies programs in a large number of college institutions. He notes, “the expansion of film study in the 1960s was largely a student-led phenomenon; universities rarely initiated and only reluctantly responded to student interest,” which falls in line with how both Ken Jacobs and Kuchar were originally hired as temporary instructors, but with student advocacy, both received more permanent positions.²⁵²

While these contributions to the study of film programs provide a very necessary foundation, what they don’t always include is a longer history that spans beyond the initial boom into the 2000s, or a deep investigation on how the classroom can provide and build upon the communities and sentiments created by the queer underground film movement. In the geographic

²⁵⁰ Vasulka, Woody, and Peter Weibel. *Buffalo heads: Media Study, Media Practice, Media Pioneers, 1973-1990*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007.

²⁵¹ Cooper, Mark Garrett, and John Marx. *Media U: How the need to win audiences has shaped higher education*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018.

²⁵² Zryd, Michael. “Experimental Film and the Development of Film Study in America,” 190.

tracking work that I have completed, the prevalence of academic institutions in the plot points and highlighted states has proven to have a distinct overlap between the queer underground communities, Kuchar's travels, and universities with film programs. With this mapping, I have been able to trace out some of the communities created with and around the queer underground film movement well beyond the initial boom, and some of those communities were formed in and around college institutions, due to film screenings, as well as educators that may have dabbled in the queer underground film movement. Furthermore, by offering up taxonomic characteristics of the queer underground film movement, it is now easier to see how exactly the queer underground can arise in the classroom to shape and inform new and potential community members. Zryd and others do make sure to mention how the institutionalization of film studies creates a "development of second- (and third-) generation students becoming filmmakers, critics, teachers, programmers, and archivists," however, there is not yet much investigation of how exactly the classroom and the community it engenders is key in this "development."²⁵³ In this arena, Kuchar's years in the classroom and the video works that he created with his students, provides an abundance of experiences and materials that can speak to the longer trajectory of film studies (up until 2011) within an art college like SFAI, as well as a distinct community-building element that occurred in Studio Kuchar, which created decade-spanning friendships – collaborative or otherwise, as well as new invested generations of queer underground community members.

George Kuchar offers us a history of almost four decades of teaching in the San Francisco Art Institute as a key member of the Film Department. San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) was the perfect breeding ground for a new generation of underground artists, as it has

²⁵³ Zryd, Michael. "The Academy and the Avant-Garde: A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance," 28-9.

always been a haven for contemporary artists since its inception in 1871.²⁵⁴ Kuchar taught topics such as Dramatic Narrative and Filmmaking and became an inspirational figure amongst the SFAI community for years to come, including an exhibition, “Living in Studio Kuchar” in the SFAI Walter & McBean Gallery in 2012, and a more recent homage in the form of a summer class titled “George Kuchar,” taught by previous student, Christopher Coppola. The course goal was to “resurrect the creative spirit of one of the most amazing filmmakers of all time,” including learning about Kuchar and, in the spirit of Studio Kuchar, creating a film in class in the style of his film and video works.²⁵⁵ Studio Kuchar was not only a space where multiple generations of students learned some characteristics of filmmaking, it was also an ongoing extension of the queer underground and pedagogy coming together to create whole new communities of artists and filmmakers.

Taking the elements eked out to define a queer underground more clearly – shamelessly amateur filmmaking, juvenile playfulness (or unseriousness), LGBTQ+ themes and vulgarity, and community and collaboration – we can see many of them arise within Kuchar’s pedagogical style and the studio format of the course. Utilizing archival materials from SFAI as well as the Harvard Film Archives, this chapter will address how Kuchar’s experiences and filmmaking style that came out of the queer underground in NYC have translated to his studio and his teaching philosophies. Not only has Kuchar written extensively about his role as educator, but there are also a handful of student evaluations and recommendations from Kuchar’s personal collection and a number of interviews with past students in Jennifer Kroot’s documentary, *It Came From Kuchar*. Furthermore, Kuchar has created a significant number of course films that

²⁵⁴ Dobbs, Stephen Mark. “A Glorious Century of Art Education: San Francisco’s Art Institute.” *Art Education* 29, no. 1 (1976): 15.

²⁵⁵ Coppola, Christopher. “Course Info.” Summary of GR-550AR-01 George Kuchar - Christopher Coppola - SU2021. San Francisco Art Institute, 2021.

show his teaching style, namely *I, An Actress* (1977) and *Evangelust* (1988), that I will draw examples from to highlight Kuchar's teaching style and the way his queer underground sensibilities helped to bolster community and personal expression in his studio. Drawing from these materials, this chapter aims to not only collect and exhibit remnants from Studio Kuchar, but also to highlight how this classroom experience mimicked and preserved many elements of the queer underground that informed his own filmmaking, well into the 2000's. Kuchar built community by creating these collaborative works and helping students create their own works, and he shared the sensibilities and characteristics of the queer underground film movement in his production style, the film contents, as well as his teaching and his screenings. I argue that the university classroom or studio space was key in spreading the characteristics and sensibilities of the queer underground film movement and drawing in new generations of community members that aided in the prolongation and resilience of the movement.

Film and Art Education: San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI)

Before addressing Studio Kuchar in depth, a contextual history of the larger trajectory of film within academic institutions, as well as a history of SFAI is important to set the groundwork of the practice of teaching film within a prestigious art school. SFAI predates the invention of film by about a decade, as it was founded in 1871 as the first art school west of Chicago – called the San Francisco Art Association at that point. By 1873, there were already a number of artists drawn to the area, including “40 painters, 46 engravers, 44 architects, several sculptors, and 11 lithographers,” as well as a number of exhibitions that attracted 16,000 viewers which solidified SFAI's place within the art realm.²⁵⁶ This had not only raised San Francisco's esteem within the art community, but it also welcomed in a community of artists, creating a haven wherein “More

²⁵⁶ Dobbs, Stephen Mark. “A Glorious Century of Art Education: San Francisco's Art Institute.” *Art Education* 29, no. 1 (1976): 15.

San Franciscans, proportionate to the population, were taking subscriptions to magazines of artistic value than any other city in the United States.”²⁵⁷ Furthermore, the San Francisco Art Association, now Institute, has had a particularly long history with film, as it was the site of the first public screening of a moving image picture in 1880 – Eadweard Muybridge’s presentation of his Zoopraxiscope.²⁵⁸ The institute continued to grow and in the early 1900s, it proved itself to be a strong source for art education and instruction – in 1916, a report was published that stated that “students of the Institute of Art had led all other art schools in the U.S. and Canada in obtaining scholarships for further study at the Art Students' League in New York City.”²⁵⁹ San Francisco Art Institute was this burgeoning gem of an artist community, and the dedication to art instruction on a variety of forms was what kept it up to date and relevant. In the 1940s, the school founded a fine art photography department with faculty including Dorothea Lange, Imogen Cunningham, Minor White, Edward Weston, and Lisette Model. This set the stage for film instruction to soon follow, with the first film course taking place in 1947, taught by Sidney Peterson.²⁶⁰ In film, SFAI wasn’t the pioneer, but it definitely took part in a larger shift that was occurring with film studies throughout the country.

Film education in America can be traced back as early as the 1930s, and with that history also comes a past of distinctions within the field. While we now have three main subfields within film programs: film theory, film production and film study, earlier divides occurred between the social sciences and humanities. In Eric Smoodin’s “‘What a Power for Education!’ The Cinema and Sites of Learning in the 1930s,” he traces the early history of film education and shows how

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ Gunderson, Jeff. “SFAI History.” SFAI. San Francisco Art Institute. Accessed December 20, 2022.

²⁵⁹ Dobbs, Stephen Mark. “A Glorious Century of Art Education: San Francisco’s Art Institute.” *Art Education* 29, no. 1 (1976): 16.

²⁶⁰ Gunderson, Jeff. “SFAI History.” SFAI. San Francisco Art Institute. Accessed December 20, 2022.

early controversies arose between the more methodological and measuring elements of film lent itself well to the fields of social sciences, but then the historical, literary and aesthetic elements of film spoke more to the humanities side. He writes, “Thus we have a movement united by a field of study—the cinema—but marked also by the conflicts between the humanities and social sciences, by methodological differences, by the needs of teachers in varying educational locations, and often by a conviction in either the political or aesthetic benefits of studying film.”²⁶¹ The breadth of film usefulness is clear within the academy, and in this initial “golden era” of film education, there was a significant variety of ways that film was taught and utilized. This rift continued into the 1950s and 60s, as evidenced by a study completed by John H. Tyo wherein he visited ten of the universities with the largest number of film courses in the spring and summer of 1959. In the findings of this study, Tyo makes note of the tension between the practical application of film and the study of film theory, writing:

One of the serious problems facing administrators of film production courses is the pressure from the institution itself to keep the courses "above the trade school level." Thus curricula are intended to stress the theoretical over the practical, to give students only the amount of skill required to familiarize them with some of the problems involved in the practice of film production, so that they may then understand the higher principles involved.²⁶²

Here Tyo is addressing how the placement of film studies within the academic institutions has created a bit of an imposter syndrome, wherein the film education needs to surpass production and must investigate deeper into the theory in order to be legitimate. This tension is one that still rears its head today, as there are many film production folks that disdain theory and there are many film philosophers that would never dabble in production. But despite this tension, Tyo

²⁶¹ Smoodin, Eric. “‘What a Power for Education!’ The Cinema and Sites of Learning in the 1930s.” Article. In *Useful Cinema*, edited by Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, 315–36. Duke University Press, 2011, 21.

²⁶² Tyo, John H. “Film Production Courses in U.S. Universities.” *Journal of the University Film Producers Association* 14, no. 4 (1962): 13.

noted that students receiving film educations during this time were “not only well-versed in the technical aspects of production, but because of the broad educational matrix in which the film courses are embedded they have also a sense of social responsibility that makes them immeasurably more valuable.”²⁶³ These students were “valuable” in the sense that they could take part in production for the most part, but they also were highly aware of the role of film in society and thus were socially responsible in what content they decided to address for mass consumption.

During these eras, teaching film was primarily a mixture of film production and some film theory to prepare students to either film in Hollywood or Pinewood Studios or to take on teaching jobs, usually at the school they trained at.²⁶⁴ However, as time went on, film study in academic institutions became more popular due to the explosion of underground and experimental film and its newfound cultural exposure. Michael Zryd discusses this shift in “Experimental Film and the Development of Film Study in America” and argues that experimental cinema was deeply important to “both artistic and educational practice,” as it excited students, was low budget, and allowed for a mixture of film theory and production discussion.²⁶⁵ This new attention to alternative cinema by the youth started to bolster the inception of student led film societies, but also the growth of film theory aided in this new boom. Zryd notes, “The high profile of 1970s film theory, especially feminist film theory through the circulation of Laura Mulvey’s widely anthologized essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,’ helped the fledgling discipline of film studies to raise its academic profile in the 1970s and 1980s and approach the status of literary, art, and critical studies.”²⁶⁶ So now, the theory side

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ Zryd, Michael. “Experimental Film and the Development of Film Study in America,” 183.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 182.

of film was strong and respected enough to hold its weight against other humanities studies, but also the focus on alternative cinemas, like the queer underground, the structural movement, etc., brought in the importance of artistic expression. The shift from focusing on production to match the standards of studios, to focusing on lower budget, more personal experimental films was key, as it solidified film study's space within the humanities and the arts. This made room for new forms of filmmaking to be taught, which ushered in the filmmakers that worked in the queer underground movement to the institutionalized space of the academy. Here, we can pick up with George Kuchar, as he began teaching in the early 1970s. For the purpose of this project, the main focus will be upon art schools and the film education that they focused on, since that is primarily where queer underground filmmakers ended up, but it is important to recognize that this is a small area of film education within a much larger tradition.

George Kuchar at SFAI: Educator Extraordinaire

The early years of George's SFAI position were primarily spent acquainting himself with the California scenery and building up a sense of community, with and without his students. He even got involved with the underground comic scene in San Francisco, becoming neighbors and friends with Art Spiegelman. George's role as an educator not only put him in contact with more people invested in queer underground filmmaking, but also allowed him to foster community in the classroom. In *Reflections of a Cinematic Cesspool*, Kuchar writes about some of his first students and how they built community; "We made films together, went to parties, explored verboten venues and occasionally threw-up as a team."²⁶⁷ During this time, he was both creating his own films, as well as creating up to five collaborative films in the classroom over the duration of a 15-week semester, and sometimes contributing to his students films. These class

²⁶⁷ Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. (32)

films have become a significant portion of his body of work, including some of his most well-known titles, including *I, an Actress* (1977), *Evangelust* (1988), and also titles like *Motivation of the Carcosoids* (1988) which was made in month-long video workshop led by George at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. In the almost four decades of teaching at SFAI, George taught the likes of Christopher Coppola (who introduced George to Nic Cage, Sofia Coppola, and other Coppola family members), Rock Ross, Sara Jacobson whose *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* was screened at Sundance in 1997, Cory McAbee, Andy Rodriguez, and so many others. One student, Jennifer Kroot, directed the documentary feature film, *It Came from Kuchar* (2009), which included a number of interviews with past SFAI students commenting on their experiences learning from George.

In this section, my aim is to draw connections between Kuchar's teaching style, the queer underground and queer pedagogy, as well as cobbling together a collage of artifacts from Studio Kuchar to preserve and present as full of a representation of this course as possible. While these artifacts exist in piecemeal across several publications, archives, and more, I will try to include them here as fully as possible to craft a record of the Studio Kuchar experience in the words of people who actually learned from and with George. This may result in a number of lengthy quotes, but I find that the character of George and the students he taught seep out from these sources and paint a better and fuller picture of the course that underscores the informal, anti-establishment, experimental, and community-building elements. The artifacts collected here work together to present an image of Studio Kuchar that can provide a clear representation of how the disruptive elements of the queer underground can be taken up and preserved within an institutional space like the college classroom. Classrooms like Studio Kuchar, which were ushered in and created by interested students and underground filmmakers, created spaces where

students could critique and disrupt the larger institutional and filmic norms and theories that usually take center stage in the classroom – and find likeminded peers to build community with. Within a space made for serious critique, serious work, and serious training, the production studio can provide a place to reject and play with these expectations and to dive into experimentation and self-expression with the film and/or video medium.

As I move forward, much of the work here is celebratory of Kuchar and his pedagogy, but we have to attend to the fact that his methods would not align with current ethical standards for educators in the 21st century. While so much of the artifacts from Studio Kuchar reflect a very positive space of learning, these artifacts have been hand-plucked by Kuchar or fans of Kuchar to be the items that memorialize the positives of the course. In my research, I did not find many negative evaluations of the course, or Kuchar’s teaching, but it is unlikely that these kinds of perspectives would have stood the test of time considering that Kuchar has become a bit of a local hero at SFAI (even his handwriting was recreated as the logo font for the SFAI Legacy Foundation + Archive).²⁶⁸ But, even without these potentially negative experiences, we can pinpoint a few areas that need to be troubled and critiqued. First and foremost, Kuchar’s relationship with student, Curt McDowell. Of course, in the early days of Kuchar’s role as educator, this kind of relationship was very popular and not yet advocated against within the university system. Furthermore, McDowell and Kuchar were only three years apart, and unlike the current university system, there was more of a likelihood for nontraditionally aged students to take college classes. And while Kuchar and McDowell remained friends and collaborators long after their romantic relationship ended, it is still important to address the potential problematics of this kind of ease with students.

²⁶⁸ “About.” SFAI Legacy Foundation + Archive. Accessed May 26, 2023. <https://www.sfailegacyarchive.org/about.html>.

In Amia Srinivasan's *The Right To Sex*, she discusses the shift in academia in the early 1980s wherein universities began to discourage and prohibit sex between professors and their students, as a way to protect against issues of sexual harassment.²⁶⁹ She discusses the issue of power differentials, but frames it in a male professor/female student setting, as she is discussing feminist history as well:

When we speak of the power differential between teacher and student, it isn't simply that the teacher has more influence on how the student's life will go than the student has on the fate of her teacher. Indeed, to represent it that way is to invite the counter that, really, women students have all the power, since they can get their male professors fired. (That's the premise of David Mamet's *Oleanna*.) Instead, the teacher–student relationship is characterised, in its nature, by a profound epistemic asymmetry. Teachers understand and know how to do certain things; students want to understand and know how to do those same things. Implicit in their relationship is the promise that the asymmetry will be reduced: that the “teacher will confer on the student some of his power; will help her become, at least in one respect, more like him.”²⁷⁰

Here, she draws upon the power differential between student and educator, which in my mind, is the crux of the argument about these kinds of relationships. Teachers have certain skills, tools, knowledge, power, and it is that, in part, that draws the student to them, romantically or otherwise. And for an educator to take advantage of that, is unequivocally unethical, especially when it is a kind of trade wherein the educator offers these skills/tools/power in exchange for sexual gratification primarily. However, as Srinivasan also mentions, “The problem with teacher–student relationships is not that they can't involve genuine romantic love,” and so what becomes the problem then is a pattern of abuse. I believe that everyone can and will make unethical decisions in their lives, and sometimes it will result in positive things happening, but what is a sign of an unethical, problematic person, is that they do not learn from their ethical pitfalls and engage in a continued pattern of wielding their power for their own gain and without

²⁶⁹ Srinivasan, Amia. *The Right to Sex*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022, 196.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 208.

any kind of care for the exploited parties.²⁷¹ Just like all questions of ethics, nuance must be applied, and we have to be aware of historical context as well, and so by the 1980s, Kuchar and McDowell's relationship was over, but there still remained blurred boundaries between student and educator in the classroom, as Kuchar was friendly with many of his students over the years. Now, to be clear, in all my research, I could not find another instance of any kind of sexual relationship with a student other than McDowell – this does not mean it didn't happen, as Kuchar is notoriously private about his romantic endeavors. However, it is likely he wasn't some kind of predator that was plucking a new student ever semester to sexually take advantage of, as that kind of reputation does not go unnoticed. This is all to say, Kuchar is absolutely not a bastion of current-day pedagogical ethics, for a variety of reasons. He is very much an educator of his time, and I have to imagine that his studio course, in all likelihood, made some students uncomfortable. The way he directs students, and incorporates a great deal of sexual content, would not be encouraged in a 2023 film classroom, but it can offer an example of art school teaching in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s.

From the early days of his teaching, Kuchar thrived in the arena of filmmaking that doesn't align to industry standards, as the previous chapters on the queer underground have discussed, and his teaching is no different. In an entry titled, "Possible lecture topics," Kuchar addresses this distinction between the kinds of films he and the class will make, and that of the films of Hollywood:

Cameras are at arms reach for the common man, who eats and walks the street and lives next door, not just for Hollywood or Pinewood studios. Now the common man makes films. But he dose [*sic*] not and should not make films to compete with Hollywood or Pinewood studios. The grand establishment makes films on the basis of whether or not it will entertain people. If it dose [*sic*] not, they will loose [*sic*] money and fold up and not make movies. The common man makes movies to see himself, his life, and we see ourselves, through him, because we are common men. The money he spends on his films

²⁷¹ *Ibid.* 206.

are never in the millions of dollars, or for that matter, seldom in the thousands. It is humble direct and honest, insane and ridiculous [*sic*], it is sexy and it is sincere, it is a reflection of a human being, a work of Art of our times.²⁷²

The films made in Studio Kuchar, then, were not meant to align or compete with those films that his students had seen and probably been raised on; instead, they were going to make films that attempted to reflect themselves and their lives. Unlike many production studios, Studio Kuchar was not focused on learning industry standards, it was focused on learning how to make films for yourself, with limited means. This is a kind of self-expression that the handheld camcorder allowed for, which Kuchar takes up heavily in his Weather Diaries and videos. In many ways, Kuchar was teaching to undermine a larger tradition in filmmaking and to show students the benefits and capabilities of a more underground style of film.

Here, we can align Kuchar's teaching goals and film styles to a larger characteristic of queer pedagogy. In "Queer Pedagogy: Praxis Makes Im/Perfect," Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell define queer pedagogy as "a radical form of educative praxis implemented deliberately to interfere with, to intervene in, the production of 'normalcy' in schooled subjects."²⁷³ We can take "normalcy" here to reflect some of the canonical and route ways of teaching, and as a reference to the more "normal" goals and processes of education as a whole. This, of course, is meant to help students align with the expectations a career would bring, but it may not allow for the kind of play that would encourage students to use film as a tool to "see" themselves and the world as opposed to Kuchar's class. The films and the teaching style of the course were directly upending notions of "normalcy" in how education was understood within academic institutions, and instead drew on the lessons Kuchar and other filmmakers learned from the queer underground to

²⁷² Lampert, Andrew. *The George Kuchar Reader*. New York, NY: Primary Information, 2014. (27)

²⁷³ Bryson, Mary, and Suzanne de Castell. "Queer Pedagogy: Praxis Makes Im/Perfect." *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l'éducation* 18, no. 3 (1993): 285

facilitate a space where there was no right or wrong, just as long as the camera was rolling. One of the things that so many of Kuchar's students celebrated about his course was this ability to weave in and out of roles and try their hand at multiple different positions of the filmmaking process. Past student, David Hallinger who made the documentary, *George Kuchar: The Comedy of the Underground*, and acted in a number of Kuchar's course films wrote:

There seemed to be a constant flow of students in and out of George's class. The truth is, it didn't seem to matter. The class film would go on, whether there were two or fifty-two. George could always make it work. So many just wanted to be a part of his wacky production class where anyone and everyone could do anything and everything. And you were never judged for a poor performance in front of or behind the camera, because it always looked good when George put it together in the editing room. This was not filmmaking, this was the ultimate therapy!²⁷⁴

This quote harkens back to what Kuchar wrote in his lecture notes, that this kind of filmmaking is for the self, not for external entertainment, but what I specifically want to draw upon is how Kuchar's classroom allowed for students to fail. Here, Hallinger is addressing how students could flit in and out of roles for the film, whether acting or production, and more importantly, how it was absolutely acceptable and somewhat encouraged to have a poor performance because whatever came of these failures, they could be utilized or cut up to be turned into a finished product by way of Kuchar's editing skills.

Failure is another important concept within Studio Kuchar and the larger queer theory tradition. In Kuchar's classroom, failure is not a bad thing, and as the rest of this chapter will show, it was not only accepted, it also was celebrated often. Within the university structure, failure is what most students and educators try to avoid, but Kuchar modeled it for his students and allowed them to drop the ball without any repercussion. But what is the benefit of failure? In academic spaces, being right and being able to deftly perform and portray being knowledgeable

²⁷⁴ Hallinger, David, George Kuchar, and Mike Kuchar. "Just beyond the Student Teacher Thing..." Essay. In *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*, 162–65. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. (163)

is a key element to gain validation, acceptance, and the checkpoints towards a degree. Tests and grades are a guiding structure by which students prove their worth or fail and have to face judgement and fallout. However, students miss out on the benefits of failure when it comes with this kind of fallout – whether it be embarrassment, having to retake a class and pay for it a second time, or having it affect a student’s own self-worth. Queer theory stalwart, Jack Halberstam questioned this inherent disdain towards failure in *The Queer Art of Failure*, asking “What kinds of reward can failure offer us?” and answering:

failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers. And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects...it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life.²⁷⁵

Failure, then, offers us a way to reject norms that otherwise distinguish proper from unruly, right from wrong, and allows us to “poke holes” in the façade of a kind of do-everything-right-and-you-shall-prosper sentiment that reigns some academic spaces. Failure makes room for other options; it pushes out the binary of right-and-wrong and instead stretches the potential possibilities for learning beyond just “getting it right.” With failure comes an adaptability that is present in Kuchar’s ethos as an instructor – an adaptability that welcomes off-kilter performances and transforms around them. There is a looseness in this ability to fail that garners a spontaneity and fluidity that is not typically a characteristic of higher education, and Kuchar thrives in this space. He says, “Teaching to me...filmmaking to me...is always some sort of loose script outline that I hope will develop into something visible and concrete, even if that concrete remains wet and vulnerable to foot-stomping and critical graffiti. It is my hope that the

²⁷⁵ Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. (3)

slab of concrete will never metamorphosize into something hard and brittle.”²⁷⁶ Kuchar’s mindset towards both filmmaking and teaching coalesce to create a space where students can join in on the creation of a project without feeling the pressure to conform to one kind of right or good, and instead give them the free reign to play.

The remainder of this section will draw from student accounts and the writings of George to show how the course aligned with the characteristics of the queer underground that I laid out in the introduction chapter. The filmmaking classroom became one of the many avenues wherein the reverberations of the queer underground were deeply felt, in part due to the migration of the filmmakers to education positions, but also due to student interest. Kuchar’s experience and ephemera from Studio Kuchar offers us deep insight into how these characteristics moved from the queer underground filmmaking boom of the 1960s and took shape within studio courses in academic institutions. First, I will provide an overview of Studio Kuchar, including how Kuchar pitched the course in his syllabus and course description, and how the course played out in terms of structure or lack thereof. Following this foundational work, I will then address each of the four distinguishing elements of the queer underground – (1) shamelessly amateur aesthetics/filmmaking, (2) unseriousness, (3) LGBTQ+ themes and vulgarity, and (4) community and collaboration – and draw connections to Kuchar’s film courses. I aim to highlight a number of moments and experiences that students and George relayed in order to argue that Studio Kuchar, amongst others, preserved and extended these facets of the queer underground and used them to build a safe and experimental place for new generations to try their hand at this style of filmmaking.

²⁷⁶ Lampert, Andrew. *The George Kuchar Reader*. New York, NY: Primary Information, 2014. (85)

Studio Kuchar: The Course

While Kuchar taught a number of different courses in his time at SFAI, with each one, he brought a similar ethos in his teaching style and the way the course was run. Primarily, the courses Kuchar taught were production courses, usually scheduled once a week for a couple of hours. This time would be spent shooting scenes, making art for backdrops and props, and setting up for scenes, but Kuchar also used the class time to show the students films from his peers. Kuchar had a significant collection of films that he had traded or been gifted from filmmakers he had run into over the years, and he would lug those reels and tapes to class and screen them. Furthermore, he also sometimes would invite guests in for class periods, to have them share their wisdom and to serve as “fresh talent” to use in the course film.²⁷⁷ It didn’t matter if this fresh talent was only going to be in one or two scenes, as Kuchar was well versed in introducing a new character just for them to disappear in the following scene. This is how he often dealt with poor-attendance, as evidenced by his T.A. for a time, Karen Redgreene: “As things progressed, Buddy stopped coming to class. The Kuchar remedy? Cut him down in a hail of gunfire! Get him out of the picture! Lorraine also developed an attendance problem and was replaced by a male drag stand-in.”²⁷⁸ These kinds of solutions sometimes make for a chaotic narrative, but this is how the course and the film persevered with an ever-shifting crew. Furthermore, this element of creative problem-solving is one of the ways the course aligns with queer underground filmmaking, which I will address in the next section.

During Kuchar’s time at SFAI, the landscape of film education changed significantly, but his pedagogical style remained fairly similar. To draw some comparisons, we can take some of

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 89

²⁷⁸ Redgreene, Karen, George Kuchar, and Mike Kuchar. “The T.A.” Essay. In *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*, 168–69. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. (168)

the older course catalogs from early in Kuchar's role as educator. In 1977-1979, the SFAI course catalog lists Kuchar's classes, alongside some of the other film classes being offered. At that time, Kuchar's style of teaching was still distinct, but not necessarily unique. While George Landow taught a similarly styled class, "Experimental Workshop," that consisted of all elements of film production and boasted, "This is not a conventional film production class. It's research into new kinds of filmmaking; making old forms new," many of the other classes felt more rigid in their scope.²⁷⁹ A "Creative Editing" class by Barbara Linkevitch focused on learning a variety of editing techniques, but also utilized collaborative learning by making an in-class 16mm silent production. There was a "Sound" class offered that focused on classic studio editing, as well as more elaborate forms of sound editing; a "Documentary" class that drew on the "history and techniques of documentary filmmaking;" an "Animation" class that studied animated films and also required student-made animation projects.²⁸⁰ There was definitely a strong throughline of production in these classes, where students were expected to learn and do, but it is clear that some prioritized a lecture element that included teaching the histories and different styles of elements of film production. While I was not able to track down course catalogs from the 1980s or 1990s, we can look to the 2011 Spring course catalog to see how the landscape changed by the final semester of Kuchar's pedagogical career.

In 2011, it is clear that not only had the film department grown, but the course topics had gotten much more specific, including course titles like, "Expanded Storyboards: Drawing as Narrative," "History of Film: Cyborg," "Documentary Film Ethics," "Digital Cinema," and more. In the 1970s, Kuchar's kind of teaching felt more common, but in reading the course

²⁷⁹ San Francisco Art Institute. *1977-1979 Course Catalog*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Art Institute, 2011. (29)

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

descriptions in 2011, his course sticks out – his course description mentions learning the “basics of film production,” and it is a lower-level course with no prerequisite.²⁸¹ It feels like the kind of entry-level course that universities or departments would have as a way to usher students into a film major or minor, where it is mostly about learning through experimenting and collaboration. The other course descriptions feel more reminiscent of a current-day film class description, with discussions of ethics, advanced film technologies, film history, and more. In comparing the two course catalogs and the classes available at the beginning and the end of Kuchar’s pedagogy career, it becomes clear that Kuchar’s style of teaching was always a bit of an outlier but became more distinct as time went on and the film discipline became more sturdy and theory focused. This may reflect a distinction regarding who gets to teach film courses, now as we have more and more graduates of advanced film degrees, as opposed to the 1970s and 80s, when artists would primarily get those positions. Despite these changes, it is helpful to know that Kuchar’s teaching has always been a bit more free flowing than his peers, even if it was a more distinct tradition in the early days of his career.

The titles of his courses changed over the span of his employment, sometimes offering courses that helped advise students on their work (a repeating element of SFAI course offerings), but generally teaching a production class. In the early years, the course was called “Dramatic Narrative,” and focused on creating scenes that tell a story: “class members will alternate as actors, set designers, camera and lighting technicians and directors. It will be a workshop class...Scenes will be written and executed on the spot.”²⁸² At some point, the production course title was changed to AC/DC Psychotronic Teleplays for some time in the 1990s. In his final year,

²⁸¹ San Francisco Art Institute. *Fall 2011 Course Schedule*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Art Institute, 2011. (63)

²⁸² San Francisco Art Institute. *1977-1979 Course Catalog*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Art Institute, 2011. (28)

2011, Kuchar was teaching courses called “Undergraduate Tutorial,” which was a one-on-one course meant to provide individual guidance, and the production course, now titled, “Electro-Graphic Sinema.” These courses would usually be scheduled for one day a week with a larger time allotment, Electro-Graphic Sinema was on Fridays from 9:00-11:45pm, and in Spring of 2011, Kuchar taught two sections, the second being 1:00-3:45pm. This version of the class featured a twist compared to some of the earlier iterations of the course, which is detailed in the course description:

Electro-Graphic Sinema is an opportunity to learn the basics of production while collaborating on the latest in a long line of testaments to cinematic excess. This production workshop tackles all the dramatic elements of narrative production including lighting, set and costume design, dialogue, directing, acting, special effects and make-up/hair design, all emphasizing low-budget DIY techniques. Students will contribute their personal talents and expressions to the production, which will be screened at the end of the semester. This companion to the legendary “AC/DC Psychotronic Teleplays” course is a collaborative cinematic adventure with a twist: the footage will be available to all who wish to edit on their own or make abstract concoctions of the existing material for other classes.²⁸³

This final line about making the footage available to any of the students was a new addition, but it absolutely falls in line with the spirit of the course. Kuchar always insisted on the films being sharable at the end of the semester, and the technical advancements available in 2011 allowed him to expand this to the raw footage, which now could be picked up and arranged as students saw fit. In earlier course descriptions, Kuchar ends with: “The final result comes out in video format so that the students can retain the experience for home usage and pass it on to all interested observers. This way it will live beyond the halls of ivy.”²⁸⁴ Even this insistence, that the video extend beyond academic spaces, speaks to the upheaval that Kuchar’s class was working towards, where the finished product wasn’t tucked away in an archive where minimal

²⁸³ San Francisco Art Institute. *Fall 2011 Course Schedule*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Art Institute, 2011. (63)

²⁸⁴ Lampert, Andrew. *The George Kuchar Reader*. New York, NY: Primary Information, 2014. (89)

groups could access it – even if that is what may have happened in the long run with much of his works and the course films only available through distribution sources like Video Data Bank that cater to institutional organizations.

Finally, to draw back to the connection to failure, the course was inherently distinct in that it operated in a much more relaxed structure than many classroom spaces. Of course, the classroom itself wasn't relaxed with the amount of production prep and follow-through that it required, but more so Kuchar's lack of punitive energy created an atmosphere where students may not have felt the harsh delineation of good vs. bad work. The remainder of this chapter will include several examples of how Kuchar operated in the classroom that show how low stakes the energy of the classroom seemed to be. In another course description, Kuchar wrote, "The atmosphere is informal and open to improvisation and inspiration from all involved. Come as frequently as you wish so that we can showcase your unique talents or specialty acts and help us try to solve the many technical and creative problems involved in making moving pictures."²⁸⁵ Studio Kuchar was an open door to making queer underground films, and it didn't punish those who didn't yet have, or want to have, significant technical skill and artistry that aligned with a more mainstream or avant-garde taste level. Instead, the informal style of the course welcomed students to come try their hand at one element, fail, bask in their failure for a week or two, if need be, and then return to try another element of filmmaking. These aspects of the course were key in creating a space that mimicked the freedom and playfulness of filmmaking that Kuchar grew up with, where one made film because they wanted to, because they had a story to tell or a character to display. Studio Kuchar may not have been able to fully replicate the atmosphere or energy of the NYC underground movement, but Kuchar did his best to bring some of the key

²⁸⁵ Lampert, Andrew. *The George Kuchar Reader*. New York, NY: Primary Information, 2014. (89)

components of the queer underground filmmaking process and style to the classroom and his students, thus expanding the queer underground community, which I will address in the following sections.

Queer Underground Characteristic #1: Shamelessly Amateur Aesthetics/Filmmaking

As discussed in previous chapters, the NYC Underground encompassed filmmakers with varied skill levels, and those who appeared more technically proficient have historically been taken more seriously and regarded to a higher degree than those whose technical skills were less honed or highlighted. George Kuchar and a number of other underground filmmakers seemed to revel in this space of amateur filmmaking, and his work responds not only to the structures of Hollywood films, but also the standards of the avant-garde film community. This comfortability with playing with film while learning all its capabilities, and recording these processes for others to see, is an element of the more specific queer underground, and George brought this energy to Studio Kuchar. During the height of the NYC underground, many filmmakers did not have the financial means to fund big productions, and instead leaned into the amateur or makeshift style and used what was easily available to them to shoot. This meant that oftentimes, creative solutions had to be deployed, which Mike and George Kuchar learned early when they were gifted their first camera at 12 years old, but didn't have any industrial lighting, so they filmed most of their scenes on the roof of the Bronx building.²⁸⁶ George already had years of working in this way, and so he also taught by showing how much the class could do with very little. One student commented on Kuchar's amateur filmmaking style in their evaluation: "The only worthwhile course because of its unique production style elements. The art institute is very lucky

²⁸⁶ Hallinger, David. *George Kuchar: The Comedy of the Underground*, 1983.

to have him.”²⁸⁷ Creative solutions were part of the course, part of the lesson for students, as it relayed that element of the queer underground where filmmakers had to make use of what was around them, and what their community could provide.

A resilient example of Kuchar’s ability to utilize creative solutions is that of an early class film made in Studio Kuchar, *I, An Actress* (1977). Filmed in the early years of Kuchar’s time at SFAI, the 1977 film was recorded on 16mm in black and white which is in line with Kuchar’s early work. Students’ names are credited to a variety of production elements: Mark Baptista for camera, Chonita Jones and Perry Carlson for sound, as well as introducing Barbara Lapsley as the actress. The film was intended to act as a screen-test for Lapsley, to provide her with a reel to share with producers to help her acting career. On the Kuchar brothers’ website, a quote from George is alongside images from the short film, where he describes the working conditions that created this piece. He wrote, “By the time all the heavy equipment was set up the class was just about over; all we had was ten minutes. Since 400 feet of film takes ten minutes to run through the camera ... that was the answer: Just start it and don't stop till it runs out. I had to get into the act to speed things up so, in a way, this film gives an insight into my directing techniques while under pressure.”²⁸⁸ The time crunch they endured to create *I, An Actress* was in part due to the classroom atmosphere, wherein setting up for the scene was just as important (if not more so) than the actual scene as well as the limited time of a class session. Had this been made in another, more professional classroom, the filming of this reel would have feasibly been given more time to rehearse, reshoot, etc., but in its current state, it provides a phenomenal, archived moment of Kuchar’s studio classroom at SFAI.

²⁸⁷ Student Evaluations, Box 1: Folder 13, *George Kuchar collection, 1940-2011*, Cambridge, MA.
<http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990133118050203941/catalog>

²⁸⁸ Kuchar, George. “I, An Actress.” KUCCHAR BROTHERS. 2021 Kuchar Brothers Trust.

An element of *I, An Actress* that speaks to Studio Kuchar's shamelessly amateur aesthetics/filmmaking is that of the inclusion of Kuchar's directing. The short film doesn't cut around the directing, and instead includes it which provides us a bevy of proof that the filmmaking in Studio Kuchar was chaotic and spontaneous. Throughout the almost-9 minute film, Kuchar is multitasking as director – discussing filming elements and cues with Baptista, directing Lapsley, and oftentimes, jumping in scene to show Lapsley what he is looking for. Kuchar goes back and forth, talking to Lapsley and then Baptista, as he sets up for Lapsley's scene. When Kuchar begins working with Lapsley, he mimes out the movements she should make as he rehearses her dialogue. For the line, "When I cheat, it's not for sex, it's for revenge," Kuchar doesn't hold back, suggestively running his hands over his "breasts" and then pushing his body back up against the wall for added effect. In this moment, Kuchar's comfortability and expertise of melodrama and exaggeration is highlighted, but also shows the process of filmmaking in Studio Kuchar. During these moments, the camera seems to be more freehanded, as it moves around with more looseness, and then returns to a more controlled movement when Kuchar moves out of the frame. When he finishes his recreation of the dialogue, he then turns back into director, telling Lapsley to begin her recitation and then quickly shifting focus to Baptista to remind him to continue rolling the film. These moments between Lapsley's acting show how Kuchar worked in-the-moment, shameless in his amateurism, and how unstructured the course was in terms of creating films. There were few rules, and the process could switch up any moment based on how Kuchar was feeling about the script, and students had to be ready and willing to go with the flow. These were not production courses with highly structured filming days – everyday was an experiment and a learning process, and no one needed to have previous filmmaking education.

Furthermore, the budget provided for the class films didn't allow for large studio productions either, so creative problem solving was utilized with the budget. The budget may have changed in the later years of Kuchar's employment, but throughout the 1990s, it was around \$1,000 per semester, as evidenced by a course description in *The George Kuchar Reader*, and a budget write-up provided by Jeff Gundersen, archivist at SFAI. This teleplay budget is from 1995 and lists costs of costumes as \$200, another \$150 to "dress up the production," \$200 on technical materials ("colored gels, foam-core board, video tape and film stock plus developing"), \$100-150 on art supplies and make up, \$200 for guest lecture fees, and whatever is left would be for emergencies.²⁸⁹ The low budget created a hard limit for the course to operate under, and it was built into the course description as well; Kuchar wrote, "All elements of production are tackled as cheaply as possible so that the maximum visual effect is achieved with a minimum of money since the budget for the whole semester is \$1000."²⁹⁰ And it must have been discussed fairly frequently within class, as this budget issue came up in the anonymous student evaluations as well, with one student writing "the Film Dept. should give more money into the budget for student film and class work."²⁹¹ For \$1,000, Kuchar and his classes were always able to make it work, and this was a significant element to the class, as it taught a more rough-and-ready style of filmmaking than they probably would have learned elsewhere.

Kuchar, being well-versed in shooting on a budget, knew how to cut corners and make the magic happen without tons of money. One of the most longstanding traditions he had was taking on the role of makeup artist instead of hiring someone or even having the actors do their

²⁸⁹ Kuchar, George. Rep. *AC/DC Psychronic Teleplay Budget \$1000*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Art Institute, 1995.

²⁹⁰ Lampert, Andrew. *The George Kuchar Reader*. New York, NY: Primary Information, 2014. (89)

²⁹¹ Student Evaluations, Box 1: Folder 13, *George Kuchar collection, 1940-2011*, Cambridge, MA. <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990133118050203941/catalog>

make-up themselves. This is clear in many of George's films, and in viewing a number of them, his tell-tale make-up style becomes clear. Kuchar would call this alter-ego makeup artist, Mr. Dominic, and his repeating oeuvre was "the overdrawn brow of Joan Crawford...affixed...in a permanently shocked formation."²⁹² This style is in *Thundercrack* (1975), a student-made film, as well as *Evangelust* (1988), and many others. Furthermore, Kuchar was used to utilizing film effects that most students may not have seen before in a more traditional filmmaking course.

Another student evaluation addresses this element of the course:

George has a wonderful way of including everyone in on the action and keeping everyone busy and showing people how to get lots of different kinds of effects with limited means – gels, miniatures, cut-outs...I think he turns people on to the aspects of filmmaking that I think are fun and interesting – ie – creative problem-solving, using imagination and working with a group – as equals.²⁹³

The use of these gels, miniatures and cut outs and some of the more practical elements of the course that helped the class get the desired effects without blowing the entire budget. In *It Came From Kuchar*, the scenes of George teaching show just how much these kind of colored gels can change the way the film looks, with swaths of red light, blue, and orange to convey a melodramatic, excessive, emotionalism to the scenes they were filming. In an interview with Christopher Coppola, one of Kuchar's student and now a faculty member at SFAI, he mentioned these filming methods that he learned from Kuchar as well. Coppola recounts a moment when he was filming his own project, where the Director of Photography was arguing about the process for the colors in the film, and he says, "We're just going to do what George does...put a silk stocking over the lens and paint it with a little silver marker, and it's going to create the best look we want." The DP argued that they should buy lenses, get more equipment, but when Coppola

²⁹² Stevenson, Jack. *Desperate Visions: The Films of John Waters & the Kuchar Brothers*. (London: Creation Books, 1996.) 182

²⁹³ Student Evaluations, Box 1: Folder 13, *George Kuchar collection, 1940-2011*, Cambridge, MA. <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990133118050203941/catalog>

put his foot down, they shot it in George's style and the DP ended up loving it.²⁹⁴ Some of these tips and tricks that Kuchar taught, then, are the kinds of lessons that may get overlooked in the face of technological advancements in the film world, but they cheaply and beautifully work to get the intended shot with limited means and accessibility.

Queer Underground Characteristic #2: Unseriousness

One of the most prevalent responses to Kuchar's course and pedagogy is that of joy and fun. Of course, not everyone would be keen on Studio Kuchar's brand of education, but for many it offered a kind of reprieve where they could further their education and have a sense of levity as well. Student and T.A., Karen Redgreene wrote, "It was always a great joy when Friday rolled around and it was time for George's class. No more politically correct art theories or largely useless critiques; it was time for fun, time to absorb directly from the creative genius of the 'Gentle Giant.'"²⁹⁵ Kuchar taught by doing, and Redgreene and other students learned by a kind of osmosis, watching Kuchar do his thing and having to follow his lead left residual lessons of filmmaking upon them. Furthermore, this quote speaks to the distinction of George's productions class to her other experiences in SFAI, which may have been more traditional in their "theories" and "critiques," whereas Studio Kuchar just dove into the creation of whatever script he wrote up that day. The content of the films and the classroom surrounding that creation was seeped in a kind of unseriousness, where there was no strict script, timeline, or standards that the students had to abide by, creating a playground type of atmosphere that allowed students to enjoy the process of filmmaking.

²⁹⁴ Kroot, Jennifer. *It Came from Kuchar*. United States: Tigerlily Films LLC, 2009.

²⁹⁵ Redgreene, Karen, George Kuchar, and Mike Kuchar. "The T.A." Essay. In *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*, 168–69. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. (168)

One of these elements of unseriousness is built into how the course was named and discussed – Studio Kuchar. In correspondences with current SFAI Librarian and Archivist, Jeff Gunderson, he made sure to inform me on the specificity of labeling of courses as “studios,” as opposed to “classrooms.” This renaming of the educational space is important, as a studio reflects a more active learning style, and as Gunderson noted, it “de-emphasizes the ‘overintellectualizing’ that can happen when people research aspects of SFAI.”²⁹⁶ The active-learning and the rejection of over-intellectualization is important to recognize when discussing Kuchar’s course, as it was less rigid and more about experimentation and problem-solving than about learning a canon of the underground – if there even is a canon. In his introduction to *In the Studio*, Brian R. Jacobson discusses how the studio space has been generally overlooked in film studies, in part due to their unseen quality, as they exist behind the scenes of the films in which we study. However, he also makes a keen point about the role of studios in educational spaces, “Or, one might say, studios were *made* to recede from critical view as part of the disciplinary formation through which film studies, not altogether unlike art history (especially in its modernist strain), has focused on visual form, textual analysis, and aesthetic lineages—the formations of style—more than the conditions from which texts arise.”²⁹⁷ Here, Jacobson is making the point that in the process of legitimizing film study within collegiate institutional spaces, the role of the studio was greatly diminished.

As discussed previously, film as a discipline really hit its stride with 1970s film theory, and in the process of institutionalizing film theory, film production became a somewhat unserious other, wherein they became spaces of action rather than study. Of course, film

²⁹⁶ Gunderson, Jeff. “Query regarding George Kuchar.” Email, 2022

²⁹⁷ Jacobson, Brian R. “Introduction: Studio Perspectives.” Essay. In *In the Studio: Visual Creation and Its Material Environments*, edited by Brian R. Jacobson, 1–20. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020, 4

production studies is still a viable subset of the discipline, but there is an overall lack of attention paid to the studio space as opposed to the analysis of the finished product of the film. Jacobson continues, “The failure by historians to consider the studio as an architectural space and material form speaks to the broader tendency to overlook material histories that are now being urgently recovered.”²⁹⁸ While this lack of attention has begun to be remedied by scholars in the 21st century, the naming of Studio Kuchar happened in a moment wherein the studio space was only beginning to be shifted to the background. Instead of leaning into the flow of film studies as a theory-based study of moving image art as representations of a historical moment or movement, etc., Kuchar and SFAI specifically labeled this course “Studio,” to reground that it was a class meant for action and creation rather than criticism. In this way, the course title is rejecting the more “serious” strain of film study, which was quickly solidifying itself to be film theory and criticism, and instead remained dedicated to film study by way of screenings and film production in the creation of a few films each semester.

Studio Kuchar was specifically undermining this scholarly bent toward seriousness, and in fact dallied in unseriousness by creating a low-stakes, experimental, movie-making experience. Drawing back to *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam picks up upon this tension between seriousness and frivolousness and academia:

Being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production...Indeed terms like serious and rigorous tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁹⁹ Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

The concept of seriousness within academic institutions is in part what upholds these systems. In order to be taken seriously, one has to perform seriousness within the confines of their discipline. And this is not to say that this attention to seriousness didn't exist within SFAI, or that Kuchar didn't take his class seriously, but instead to show how Kuchar utilized unseriousness to allow his students and himself the possibility of "visionary insights or flights of fancy," and encouraged them to dig their heels into the irrelevant and frivolous. In Studio Kuchar, there was never a bad take – with Kuchar's editing skills, everything was usable. David Hallinger, when discussing his acting abilities in Kuchar's films, wrote, "Somehow he would manage to cut around me, making scenes work in spite of my shortcomings and mistakes. Mistakes are good, or can always be turned around and made to work!"³⁰⁰ This attitude towards mistakes allows for students to go off-book, to be terrible, and to learn in real time without feeling tethered to a performance of serious intellectualism. Studio Kuchar made room for the playful part of filmmaking, the experimenting of trying different processes, and used all of it in the final product.

In *I, An Actress*, a multitude of things are clear about Kuchar's classroom and pedagogy, namely the lighthearted, comfortable, and fun atmosphere created and upheld in part by Kuchar. There is an intricate balance between the necessity of "getting the shot" and following direction alongside the moments of rehearsal, of playful planning, that erupt throughout the short. This is clear within the film, as the camera work is more haphazard when Kuchar is in frame, showing that there are moments when all players need to be "on" versus when there are directorial asides to work on the performance. When Kuchar steps in, his direction isn't just working to inform

³⁰⁰ Hallinger, David, George Kuchar, and Mike Kuchar. "Just beyond the Student Teacher Thing..." Essay. In *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*, 162–65. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. (164)

Lapsley how she should be moving and acting, it is also working to show all the students that Kuchar is just as invested – to the point of making a bit of a fool of himself to do so.

Within pedagogy studies, the use of humor is highly important, especially self-effacing humor. In a piece about humor in the classroom, economics professor, Ron Deiter writes, “Revealing your faults and weaknesses gives students a feeling of comfort in knowing that maybe you're not perfect and so they're not expected to be either.”³⁰¹ Kuchar uses this sentiment in making himself and his body the focus of humor. At one moment, Lapsley is meant to approach her “scene partner,” which looks to be a wig on an incomplete mannequin (or perhaps a coat rack? It is shot from behind, so it is unclear) with a blazer on, but as she performs, she does not interact with it. Kuchar again steps in, and as he recites the lines, he caresses and then fully embraces the “scene partner.” As he lowers himself to hug the “scene partner,” Lapsley and other students off screen begin to laugh as Lapsley gestures to Kuchar in a mix of amazement and slight embarrassment. When Lapsley begins to recreate this moment, she giggles, drops the cigarette out of her mouth and quickly tries to recompose herself. Within seconds, she begins delivering her lines, approaching the “scene partner” reaching out to touch and embrace it, similar to Kuchar’s direction, but with less exaggeration. The shot is once again less controlled when Kuchar is on the screen and becomes more guided and less quivering when it is just Lapsley. She runs her fingers through the wig, and Kuchar yells out that now she should drop to her knees which she promptly does. But, of course, Kuchar comes into frame and performs it once again, this time falling to his knees as he holds and grasps at the “scene partner,” jostling it just so that it’s “head” quietly falls off. Before escaping out of frame again, Kuchar picks up the

³⁰¹ Deiter, Ron. 2000. “The Use of Humor as a Teaching Tool in the College Classroom.” *NACTA Journal* 44 (2): 26

head, saying “wait, put the head on,” as the students chuckle and then he reattaches the head as Lapsley practices her embrace on the rest of the “scene partner.”

The usefulness of these moments is clear, as each time Lapsley begins to loosen up a bit more. First, she displays some bashfulness and embarrassment at Kuchar’s direction, but when he takes the time to perform himself, and does so in such an exaggerated manner, it allows Lapsley to shed some of those fears that are holding her back and laugh at them, which enables her to meet Kuchar halfway. As Scott Simmon wrote in the film essay for *I, An Actress*, “The student cannot summon up the hysterical excess of her director but finishes her screen test all the same. In Kuchar films, everyone gets a chance to be a star.”³⁰² Lapsley did get her chance to be a star here, and with Kuchar’s direction and willingness to make light of himself, he was able to pull out a performance that may not have met his excess but did surpass the fearful and restrained performance that Lapsley begun with. This short film highlights the way Kuchar taught and how the use of unseriousness by way of comedy and laughter throughout the scene welcomed more student engagement and interaction. *I, An Actress* provides a wonderful example of how Studio Kuchar, under George’s tutelage, encompassed the unserious spirit of the queer underground.

Lastly, this unserious element of the course and the larger queer underground made it so that Studio Kuchar was really an experimental playground wherein students could take risks without worrying if they worked or not. Thus, Studio Kuchar welcomed students to come in and play and learn at the same time. In one final example, Kuchar wrote about a semester of his class wherein the students were primarily women and what he noticed in the way the course encouraged them to experiment. He wrote:

³⁰² Simmon, Scott. *I, An Actress*. Film essay. From the Library of Congress, *National Film Preservation Foundation*.

It was wonderful to watch the young women film the male nude because suddenly the studio setting became part biology lab and part kindergarten....The scene they were shooting was supposed to take place in a kitchen and so they whipped up some chocolate fudge and slopped it onto the nude classmate as he lay sprawled on a table. Then they all got into a fudge fight and wound up rolling around in the sweet muck.³⁰³

While Kuchar didn't mention the year that this course took place, there is a specific freedom apparent in this retelling. The studio becoming "part biology lab and part kindergarten," is especially relevant in a classroom full of women, presenting a kind of freedom of exploring the male student's body and getting to choose how and what to film. Considering film's long history of gendered critiques and the continued lack of women behind the camera, this story takes on extra meaning in that it presents the studio space as somewhat outside of the problems of the larger film studio system. In this instance, the women in the class were not relegated to only playing bombshells or old biddies, but instead they had this exploratory and celebratory power within this unserious space that allowed for them to fill in roles how they saw fit and to turn the camera around to record this kitchen-and-fudge scene. This is relevant because the imposed seriousness of some academic spaces can affect certain demographics more than others, like women, marginalized groups, etc., where the fear of repercussion and consequence is stronger and thus the necessity of adhering to that seriousness is much more significant. And so, the fact that the scene devolved into a playful food fight acts as proof of how the studio ran, where students were so primed to unseriousness that a scene ending in a raucous food fight shows that even the women in the class were comfortable enough to play and engage their more juvenile senses. Studio Kuchar brought this unserious element from Kuchar's history of filmmaking within the queer underground and gave students the freedom to run amuck and experiment with multiple facets of moviemaking.

³⁰³ Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. (40)

Queer Underground Characteristic #3: LGBTQ+ Themes and Vulgarly

LGBTQ+ Themes and vulgarity are a key element of all the works Kuchar takes part in, primarily because he tends to write most of the material. In the Studio Kuchar films, George would often just write the scene the day of class, and then through student feedback and improvisation, the content would evolve. However, there is always the remnant melodramatic cadence replete with double entendres, exaggerated sex scenes and vulgar descriptions. Furthermore, being situated in San Francisco throughout the late 1970s, Kuchar's students were also invested in these kinds of themes and imagery. Kuchar wrote about the early days of his teaching career:

Young people in this City by the Bay were aiming their movie cameras at exposed chakras left and right – the sexual revolution was in full swing at that time. This was fine with me as it made sitting through their films much more enjoyable. One quiet youth used to screen his super 8mm movies in my morning class. We'd all munch on croissants and sip coffee while we watched his latest epic on how to play with your pecker in 101 ways.³⁰⁴

He also recounts other student films, one where a female student of his was, "being sodomized by a latex novelty while indulging in coke of a non-carbonated powder."³⁰⁵ There was clearly little to no subject matter that was too gauche, too tacky or too sexual. Students in the Studio Kuchar class had to be comfortable with this kind of content in many ways, as it showed up in his scripts and was a significant element of the course, and in part the course may have taught a certain comfortability with this content through its unserious portrayal of sex and sexual encounters.

While there are a bevy of the Studio Kuchar films that utilize this kind of vulgarity and/or LGBTQ+ themes, one in particular speaks to both vulgarity and a LGBTQ+ theme in terms of

³⁰⁴ Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. (32)

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

popular culture criticism. The Fall semester of Underground Drama in 1987 decided to tackle the topic of televangelist scandals, drawing quite closely from the lives and aesthetics of Tammy Faye and Jim Bakker in the course film, *Evangelust* (1988). Kuchar describes this film as, “A deliberately tasteless drama about televangelist scandals,” and follows a televangelist couple, Tammy Faye and Jim – no last names in the film, and touches upon much of the Bakker’s real life scandals that happened earlier in the year.³⁰⁶ Tammy Faye and Jim Bakker were the founders of the PLT (Praise the Lord) network in 1974 and were famous evangelists that took their ministry work to television with a talk show-style format where they interviewed prominent ministers and popularized the notion that good Christian faith would lead to success in both financial and material ways. However, in 1987, these titans of Christianity met their first big downfall, when Jim Bakker was accused of sexual assault and attempting to pay off his victim with PTL funds, as well as Tammy Faye’s addiction issues came to light.³⁰⁷ And while Tammy Faye may have eventually become somewhat of a queer icon in later years, at the time they were both aligned with evangelist ideals that painted LGBTQ+ lifestyles as inherently evil. *Evangelust* doesn’t just poke fun at these scandals, but also the hypocritical nature of many religious figures that praise one thing and practice something entirely different in real life. This level of criticism can speak back to a tongue in cheek, queer response to the politics and messages that the Bakkers were used to making.

In *Evangelust*, the Studio Kuchar class recreated some of these scandals, with a difficult-to-watch scene wherein sexual assault victim, Jessica (presumably named after Bakker’s real victim, Jessica Hahn), is being force-fed pills before Jim and another man starts to undress her,

³⁰⁶ Kuchar, George. *Evangelust*. Video Data Bank. Accessed October 24, 2022.

³⁰⁷ Bertram, Colin. “Tammy Faye and Jim Bakker: Inside Their Relationship and the Scandals That Brought down Their Empire.” Biography.com. A&E Networks Television, September 15, 2021

unveiling a plastic breast plate, and unzipping their pants to reveal silicone dildoes.³⁰⁸ This scene attempts being humorous by making Jim and his accomplice seem like blundering fools, as well as the use of cheesy, cheap props for the nudity, but also points to the realness of this accusation by presenting the assault as a drugging and rape scene. Here, we can draw connections to the queer practice of camp, and how Jack Babuscio argues that queer sensibilities and camp allow for the most horrific realities to be treated with a distance in a humorous way, only for audiences to later reflect on “the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed.”³⁰⁹ Within the larger framework of the piece, this scene is surely the one that lingers with questions of moral implications, and considering the rest of the film’s silliness, the film may be attempting this kind of move.

Beyond this scene, *Evangelust* includes a lot of sexual imagery, including Tammy Faye being pleased by men and women, Jim taking part in homoerotics with his male friends, and then a significant playfulness with Christian imagery. One of the key props in the background of a number of shots is a phallicized cross, with the bright pink and enlarged mushroom tip. Furthermore, the dialogue is full of veiled vulgar language. In one scene, an excessively styled Tammy Faye is called up to the pulpit with the phallic-cross, and she begins to sing a song about Jesus’s love in the style of a camptown country song. She sings, “Oh Jesus is my plumber, for he unclogs my soul. His love is like a roto-rooter, cleaning out my hole...” while performing a dance. As the performance continues, her backup dancers start rubbing the cock-styled crucifix and each other, while Tammy dances behind and tamely taps at the prop as it starts shooting out the white liquid. The song’s playful connotation and the sexualized performance makes a

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁹ Babuscio, Jack. “The Cinema of Camp (AKA Camp and the Gay Sensibility),” in *Camp: Queer aesthetics and the performing subject: A reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 128.

mockery of the kind of content that the PTL network would show in earnest. *Evangelust* doesn't stop there, there is also a scene with a wife thanking her husband for providing for her, with the dialogue "I ain't complaining baby, not when you put meat in my mouth at night," clearly playing on the act of fellatio. Further in the film, there is a puke scene followed by a close-up on the vomit, as well as one of the characters defecating publicly alongside flatulence sounds, and an axe-murder scene with spurting blood. These moments are just examples of the kind of vulgarity that Studio Kuchar films dabbled in, with simulated sex scenes of all sexual orientations, body emissions that most would be embarrassed of and more. In *George Kuchar: The Comedy of the Underground*, Hallinger films one scene of Kuchar directing a sex scene between characters, calling out that it should be animalistic, and as they start moaning and groaning and feigning sexual intercourse, there is laughter throughout and between cuts. This kind of laughter and disruption might typically call for a reshoot, but instead, Kuchar cuts as he, the actors and the class is laughing, and says "Alright good, we're all finished!"³¹⁰ The students in Studio Kuchar played with these topics and went along with and amplified Kuchar's already-excessive style and created a body of films that are both funny and crass. In most classrooms, these topics would be shied away from, but here they were embraced, and students who stuck around became invested and enjoyed the hilarity of the over-the-top narratives.

Queer Underground Characteristic #4: Community and Collaboration

For this final element of the queer underground, the amount of collaboration and community is already quite apparent. While George was the teacher and main writer of the content of these films, his students populated the films and took his direction and followed their own instincts, creating truly collaborative finished products. Furthermore, Kuchar regularly

³¹⁰ Hallinger, David. *George Kuchar: The Comedy of the Underground*, 1983.

pulled in other underground filmmakers and non-student actors into these projects, which made them even more community-based. For example, underground filmmaker Peggy Aluvesh did a cameo in *Evangelust*, where she has diarrhea on camera. And while sometimes the class lost actors and production members due to poor attendance, the film projects always required a large amount of labor and creative input from the students in the course. Whether it was styling their costumes, coming up with an idea for characterization, changing the dialogue, or holding the camera as Kuchar directed, this body of class films would never have happened without collaboration between teacher and students. Kuchar, in particular, was also very willing to help his students complete their film works as well. He famously acted in and helped write Curt McDowell's porn-opus, *Thundercrack!* (1975), even disrobing and laying bare his own penis for the film. One of the student evaluations from the Harvard Film Archive addressed this element of the course, "The artistic spirit of the teacher and T.A. carried over and inspired me to finish my personal film, which was rewarding. Also having to work with my fellow classmates was valuable and important."³¹¹ Here, it is clear that the community element of not only Studio Kuchar, but also SFAI as a whole, made for tangible gains in creativity for students and faculty.

A final example from *I, An Actress* speaks to the collaborative element of Studio Kuchar. As previously discussed, Kuchar would regularly jump into the scene to show Lapsley the kind of performance he was looking for. He typically leaned into a melodramatic reading, with a lot of over-the-top body movements. For example, in one moment, Kuchar mimes out the movements that she should make as he rehearses her dialogue. As Lapsley approaches the line that Kuchar played out for her, she does not do the suggested body movements, and Kuchar steps in again, placing focus on how he suggestively rubs his body during the "it's not for sex" portion,

³¹¹ Student Evaluations, Box 1: Folder 13, *George Kuchar collection, 1940-2011*, Cambridge, MA. <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990133118050203941/catalog>

extending his chest outwards while making sure Lapsley is watching him closely. Lapsley laughs and says, “Okay George, [stumbles over words] I’m too embarrassed,” clearly unsure of his direction. Kuchar then urges her to try it “just a little bit,” potentially suggesting a less-exaggerated version. The two of them then repeat the line with a variety of similar movements to Kuchar’s initial direction, Lapsley leaning into it more as she laughs and smokes a cigarette. Then, later, the line “Haven’t you seen women on their knees before, or is it only on their backs?” is played through a number of times, with Kuchar directing off screen. Lapsley follows his direction, at one point, Kuchar tells her to kick up at the “scene partners” head, and she laughs and says, “I can’t reach that high,” while students in the background laugh as well. Lapsley starts to suggest other options, and Kuchar slides into screen next to her, laying down on the ground and kicking his leg up, again showing her directly what he is looking for. She mimics his movements, and he slides out of screen again. As Lapsley kicks upward at the “scene partner,” Kuchar urges her to actually kick and “knock it down.” The “scene partner” comes toppling down and some laughter and applause comes from off-screen. Lapsley is overjoyed as Kuchar comes back in frame, complimenting her and checking that there is no more to the script. She answers affirmatively, laughs and claps her hands as the film cuts off and “The End” is put up on screen with similar music as the opening credits.

Here, we can see that collaboration is deeply important to the final product. While Kuchar offers one performance, the student will counter with their own vision, taking on some of his directing and mixing it into their performance. The lightheartedness of the space creates a community of filmmakers working together to create one finished product, and because of that lightheartedness, the collaboration is generative without too much criticism. In *I, An Actress*, Lapsley is clearly a bit shy and over-serious in the beginning, taking the script as a kind of

assignment, but throughout the filming, Kuchar enables her to trust him and his direction. The studio space and Kuchar created a kind of ease in which all the students were able to laugh and enjoy themselves and create a small community of trust wherein Lapsley was able to shrug off some of the fear of ridicule due to Kuchar's overexaggerated performances. While we see her doubt his direction when she says she is too embarrassed to mimic his performance, there is a trust built up between them and the classmates that allows her to give it a shot and push herself towards a more exaggerated performance than she was originally willing to give. Had this short reel been filmed in another studio class that was not informed by queer underground filmmaking, it would have looked and felt entirely different, with none of the behind-the-scenes moments. This isn't to argue that community and collaboration are absent in all other classrooms, but instead to highlight how a queer underground-informed classroom prioritizes these characteristics of filmmaking and builds them into the structure of creating moving images. Lapsley's final interpretation of the script and performance was good enough, even if it never met Kuchar's version of the performance. And her small Studio Kuchar community came together to collaborate on her reel and provide input that created this artifact of the creative cooperation that reigned the space.

Finally, it is also important to note what Kuchar gained from this collaborative community. Of course, the Studio Kuchar films are all technically labeled as his, which of course is a boon to Kuchar's already extensive body of work. But beyond that, Kuchar made lifelong friendships and relationships out of his time teaching. First and foremost, Curt McDowell was not only a longtime friend, but he was also Kuchar's lover for a while with them collaborating on a number of films. From this relationship there spawned so many artworks, drawings, scripts and films, and while the romantic relationship didn't last, the collaborative friendship did.

Unfortunately, McDowell died in 1987, and Kuchar created a film that recounted some of his final meetings with McDowell, as well as his funeral. Of course, it was still done in Kuchar fashion, with farts and playful forays to a cultural food festival.³¹² Furthermore, Kuchar would travel the country and visit many of his previous students, as discussed in Chapter 2. And finally, Kuchar had this community to rely on to help with the stressors of teaching as well. In an essay titled, “The T.A.” Karen Redgreene writes about one semester that Kuchar was particularly overbooked:

When the schedule for the next semester’s classes came out I couldn’t believe my eyes. George was slated to do *AC/DC Psychotronic Teleplays* from 9am to 4pm and from 4pm to 10pm! What a grueling schedule! Were they trying to kill my old friend? Twelve hours and sixty-plus students? And he has to write, shoot, edit and manage the class? Sheesh! I was really worried about him and couldn’t let him do it alone. I signed up to T.A. both classes. I hoped that I could at least serve as a point of continuity in this chaotic situation. Rather than cable schlepping, my focus this semester was to see that George stopped on time, got a snack here and there, and wasn’t bothered by too many distractions. In other words, just to be a friend.³¹³

Here, we can see that Redgreene was worried about George, about him as a friend more than an educator, and she stepped in to help. This was a two-way street, where George and the students greatly benefitted from the community they created in the classroom and the collaboration that it welcomed. And many times the classroom led to long friendships and mentorships, as evidenced by Christopher Coppola’s continued praise of Kuchar, even going as far as creating a class as an homage towards Kuchar’s memory. These films and classroom experiences bonded the students and Kuchar and made for a long tradition of uniquely wacky class films that show how collaboration can work in institutional studio spaces.

³¹² *Video Album 5: The Thursday People*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1987. DVD.

³¹³ Redgreene, Karen, George Kuchar, and Mike Kuchar. “The T.A.” Essay. In *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*, 168–69. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997. (169)

Conclusion

For close to forty years, George Kuchar played a pivotal role at the San Francisco Art Institute, wherein he brought along his experience in the queer underground and passed it along to a countless number of students. To return to a quote from John Waters, “He has inspired four generations of kids to make movies.”³¹⁴ Kuchar didn’t just inspire, though, he taught a specifically more accessible, community-oriented, queer underground style of filmmaking to these students, showing them that there are countless ways to make an art film, and no content is bad content. He provided the tools, resources, and the positive experience of moviemaking to his students and encouraged a spontaneous mode that inspired students to attempt filmmaking in their own style rather than sticking to a standard. Future projects may take these students up as potential sources, just to track and see how many of them became key members in the larger underground film communities. For now, though, it is clear that Kuchar, along with many other queer underground filmmakers, moved into academic spaces, brought their experiences into the classroom, and inspired new generations of queer underground community members.

For Kuchar, that meant that the characteristics and ethos of the queer underground film movement arose in his teaching: with LGBTQ+ themes and vulgarity playing into much of the content of the course films, with shamelessly amateur filmmaking/aesthetics being present in the production style and finished products of the work, alongside Unseriousness which provided a lighthearted atmosphere that celebrated mistakes and enabled an unconstrained filmmaking style in the studio, and finally, with Community and Collaboration through his mentorship, friendships, and his continued willingness to work with others to create films and videos. In exploring Kuchar’s role in the studio classroom space, then, it becomes clear how college

³¹⁴ Kroot, Jennifer. *It Came from Kuchar*. United States: Tigerlily Films LLC, 2009.

institutions can and did become respites for queer underground filmmakers as well as new sites to share and expand the queer underground community. Upon looking more deeply into Studio Kuchar, we can see how and why there was such a significant overlap of college institutions in the geographical mapping of the queer underground, as these educational spaces were key in spreading and sharing the characteristics of the queer underground film movement and were open to varieties of film styles beyond the mainstream. These courses, the screenings, and visiting speakers that were available to student and surrounding communities, meant that these spaces were more welcoming to the kinds of critiques and sensibilities that the queer underground stood for. Kuchar offers us one example of how these queer underground elements were able to translate to the classroom, and while others may not have gone about teaching in the same way, what is clear is that the characteristics of past film movements don't disappear when the movement ends; it travels alongside the members of the movements to inspire their future works and communities of filmmakers.

CONCLUSION

Introduction

This project has carved out some of the characteristics specific to the queer underground film movement and has uncovered the importance of community and collaboration in the inception, longevity, and resilience of the movement. Through geographic mapping and a place-oriented take on the queer underground film movement, I have traced the reverberations of the initial boom of the movement in 1960s NYC outwards over time and space by way of George Kuchar's videos and travels and LGBTQ+ zines that circulated via post throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The queer underground film movement has always been invested and tethered to the larger LGBTQ+ or queer underground community, a community of people who, in the 1960s, were fighting for their freedom and civil rights, with events like Stonewall, showing the mounting pressure for LGBTQ+ folks over the decades prior, which exploded a sense of LGBTQ+ solidarity against oppressive forces. This fight continued into the 1970s and 1980s, and expanded as the AIDS epidemic began attacking the community. The LGBTQ+ community in the 1990s saw more AIDS and HIV related deaths, fights for fair medical treatment, and continued attacks on queer arts by way of obscenity charges and the destabilization of the NEA. Throughout this time, the queer underground community was deeply invested in criticizing the treatment of themselves and their peers and finding spaces, community members, and avenues to share these criticisms as well as queer underground art and moments of queer joy. Given the tethering between the queer underground community and the queer underground film movement, these continued struggles would surely remain as instigators to the creation and dissemination of queer underground art forms. We can see this in the communities and smaller hubs uncovered by the geographical mapping, and we can take the spattering of communities across coastal, inland,

urban, and rural spaces to reflect a resilience in queer underground communities, creation, critiques, and sensibilities.

In paying close attention to film criticism from the time, as well as distinctions present in the film works, I was able to explicate four main characteristics of the queer underground film movement and the surrounding community: shamelessly amateur aesthetic/filmmaking, LGBTQ+ themes and vulgarity, unseriousness, and community and collaboration, as well as a Queer Disgust Aesthetic. These characteristics and aesthetics are present in the film works of the queer underground film movement and are shared with the larger queer underground community, as evidenced in the LGBTQ+ zines. This connection, between the queer underground film movement and the queer underground community, is another element that this project has elucidated by way of these shared characteristics and the overlapping map points. The map points further solidified the connection between the queer underground and academic institutions, with Kuchar's college teaching and visits as well as the LGBTQ+ zines' references to academia, confirming that academic institutions offered a sturdy framework and foundation for queer underground films and sentiments to be shared and celebrated. Through these multiple avenues, I was able to explore the queer underground film movement and community beyond the initial boom in the 1960s and trace its trajectory through the United States, over the span of approximately four decades. The unearthing of these elements and networks of the queer underground film movement have been key in recognizing the importance of community in the movement and opens up multiple questions and threads of possible investigation. One such question that I will begin to address here is: What has happened since? How does the queer underground film movement operate in the 2000's through the present, with technological advancements, social medias, a gatekept academic institutional system, etc.?

Looking Forward: The Present and Future of the Queer Underground

The scope of this project is limited in that it ends with Kuchar's death in 2011 and focuses on LGBTQ+ zines made in the 1980s and 1990s. The work and claims present here do not reflect or discuss at all what happens to queer underground film and the surrounding community much beyond the 2000s, beyond a few moments discussed in connection to Kuchar in the last 11 years of his life. Primarily, this work focuses on a window between the boom of the queer underground film movement to the early 2000s, with very little attention paid to how the movement changed following that window. This limited window was important to investigate, but what can be said about the queer underground film movement in the years since? In this time, there have been significant technological advancements that could shape and change the way up-and-coming queer underground filmmakers are making and sharing their works. First and foremost, the growing use of the internet in the 21st century must have had an impact on the queer underground film movement and community. Not only can it offer faster and more discreet ways for community members to find each other, share information and media, in recent years, it may be easier to access the internet than a physical queer zine or transportation to the nearest zine convention or queer underground film screening. And with online archives like QZAP, folks can even access queer zines from their homes. Furthermore, since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been more availability and possibility for virtual screenings. The internet could feasibly have completely upended and changed the way people connect and share queer underground films and sensibilities.

With the internet, a host of other technological advancements and potentialities are also possible. The handheld digital camera, via a phone or otherwise, has many more capabilities than a handheld camcorder that Kuchar used, and it doesn't require transposition between formats, as

it allows users to film, edit, and distribute all from one or two devices. The editing programs available today are also much more advanced and available. While Kuchar relied on the video editing bay at SFAI, current-day queer underground filmmakers would not need that same technology and instead could access similar styled tools via a free or cheap editing application or program. Furthermore, there are many more avenues for distribution, with hosting sites like YouTube, Vimeo, Tiktok, etc., there is much more ease in presenting ones work for others to see. Where Kuchar had to be introduced to the right people for his work to be screened, queer underground filmmakers today would just need to upload it and share it around their social media pages with the relevant tags. Of course, there may also be downsides to all these advancements, in that by offsetting the community and the films to the internet space, there may be less prioritization in creating and upholding non-virtual venues or events for connection and queer underground film art. Furthermore, with the plethora of media available on the internet, it also may make it more difficult to parse through it all to find the queer underground works that fall in line with the longer tradition. And with all these technological advancements, the work very well may look different or take up different aesthetics or sensibilities to reflect the politics and social culture of the moment.

All of these elements require further exploration, and one potential source to begin this work is Jack Sargeant's *Flesh and Excess: On Underground Film*, wherein he traces underground film through the 2000s with a particular focus on the representation of the human body. There could also be more studies on current-day queer underground filmmakers, for example, like Courtney Fathom Sell, who IndieWire labeled "a reincarnation of the young John Waters," Reverend Jen Miller and their now defunct studio – Art Star Scene Studios, or more commonly known as, ASS

Studios.³¹⁵ Investigating more deeply the contemporary queer underground community and creators could address how the movement and the styles of filmmaking has changed in the last two decades. Furthermore, it is my hope that we will see more studies on queer underground film beyond the scope offered in this project – not just in terms of timeline, but also in terms of geography. By mapping out these hubs in America, there are many spaces and locales that could be worthy of a deeper dive into the history of queer underground film and its communities in specific cities or towns, like what David E. James did with L.A. in *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*. It would also be interesting to follow queer underground filmmakers that left the country and how they were taken up in communities elsewhere, to investigate more queer underground communities and film works in other countries.

Furthermore, this focus on academic institutions could be explored more in depth by looking at more classroom and studio spaces led by queer underground filmmakers, as well as how the dependence between academic institutions and queer underground and/or experimental film works has changed in the past few decades. Michael Zryd has begun this in his own work, with a specific focus on Canada and experimental film in his piece, “A Report on Canadian Experimental Film Institutions 1980-2000,” wherein he notes, “There is no published history of Canadian experimental/avant-garde institutions, and most essays and reports that do exist are informal, anecdotal, or simply obscure.”³¹⁶ Expanding our understanding of how film, and queer underground film particularly, has been taken up by academic institutions across the globe would allow us a deeper understanding of how the content has been shaped by the institution, especially

³¹⁵ Team, Indiewire, and Courtney Fathom Sell. “My Top 5 Slightly Illegal Tips for No-Budget Filmmakers.” IndieWire. IndieWire, August 5, 2011.

³¹⁶ Zryd, Michael. “A Report on Canadian Experimental Film Institutions 1980-2000.” *North of Everything: English Canadian Cinema Since 1980*. Eds. William Beard and Jerry White. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2002, 392.

in more recent years. In the following section, I will raise some of the questions and concerns I have for the institutionalization of queer underground film, and how the changes in academic institutions over the past two decades may have also created unexpected barriers to the spread of the content, but I hope more extensive work will be done by others in the discipline in the future.

A Note on the Institutionalization of Queer Underground Film

The relationship between academic institutions and avant-garde, and/or queer underground, film has been well documented within this project and by many scholars, including Michael Zryd. Zryd has written about this connection between the two as a relationship of dependence, but he has also written about how these kinds of films operate in the classroom. He writes, “Many experimental films expressly reject the dominant mode of cinema spectatorship—that is, consumption, embodied in commercial Hollywood cinema. Instead, experimental filmmakers construct a cinema that addresses viewers in radical ways, ambitiously offering new forms of experience and invitations for reflection.”³¹⁷ This kind of radical viewing feels especially applicable to the classroom space, considering that the classroom is framed as a space wherein students and educators can and do interact with difficult content with the ability to discuss as the information is processed. The somewhat liminal space of the classroom allows students to interact with ideas and content they may not have had access to otherwise, to express ideas or thoughts that may not be solidly formed, and to be guided by an educator who has deeper and fuller knowledge of the content. And so, in many ways, the academic space seems like it is the perfect place for experimental, avant-garde and/or underground film works to find stability. But are there any downsides to the tethering between the two? And how might the state

³¹⁷ Zryd, Michael. “Experimental Film as Useless Cinema.” Article. In *Useful Cinema*, edited by Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, 315–36. Duke University Press, 2011, 317.

of the academic institution potentially create constraints or barriers to accessing these kinds of films or materials?

First, it is imperative to note that without academic institutions, I would probably have never heard of George Kuchar or had access to view his works. That may seem like a large claim that is impossible to validate, but even if I had read books like *Allegories of Cinema* by David E. James, *Desperate Visions: Camp America* by Jack Stevenson, or Scott MacDonald's *The Garden in the Machine*, etc., as a non-academic, it would have been difficult and costly to gain access to any of his works. While there are some available on the internet, there is no way of knowing when they may be taken down, how they may have been edited by the uploader, and so forth. So, my work and my experience of these films are indebted to my educators, higher education, and the access offered to me by way of the academic institution. However, I am somewhat haunted by the "what if?" How difficult and expensive would it have been to access the films, videos, and even the academic scholarship without access to the university library and the plethora of journal subscriptions that come with it?

Most universities, of course, do offer screenings for the public, and there are always film festivals, and smaller, independent venues that may offer screenings as well. There isn't a complete vacuum here, but there is such a significant pattern of academic institutions being the expected customer for rentals from places like The Film-makers Cooperative, Canyon Cinema and Video Data Bank that their prices and requirements reflect this expectation. For both The Film-makers Cooperative and Canyon Cinema, most of their holdings are 16mm, 35mm, Super 8, or 8mm films that require projectors. These projectors are not easy to find or operate in the digital era, and this becomes yet another barrier. While the costs aren't always astronomical to rent (The Film-makers Cooperative has a minimum rental fee of \$40, whereas Canyon Cinema's

rental fees range from \$20-\$325), the materials needed to screen these film reels is much harder to come by.³¹⁸ For the Video Data Bank, which holds a large collection of Kuchar's video works, the prices are a bit more hefty, with a single rental license for a DVD could be upwards of \$100. Digital files, which would probably be easiest for an independent scholar, are a bit pricier. Now, all three of these organizations do have some bracketed pricing, wherein library purchases jump up significantly. For example, *Weather Diary 2* is \$140 to rent a DVD for one single screening, \$150 for a digital file for one screening, but then jumps up to \$350 for the library purchase of an educational license.³¹⁹ So, there is an attention to the different kinds of customers, but this is still costly and very difficult for the independent scholar, or hobbyist to justify, especially with the films that require projection. Of course, there is difficulty in imagining another reality wherein access to these films would be open and free, especially when figuring in digitation costs. It is relevant to mention that Video Data Bank does attempt to open access with its VDB TV initiative that "offers viewers across the United States and beyond access to rare video art, the opportunity to engage with programs conceived by a wide range of curators, and original writing, all while ensuring that artists are compensated for their work."³²⁰ However, their releases are quite minimal, with one program spanning multiple months. This is to say, that while there may be attempts made to provide access to folks outside of academia, the attempts are limited.

This question of access to the film and video works, then, leads to other questions of access and the gatekeeping of knowledge for communities and people who cannot easily afford higher education. If, as Zryd and I have argued, the academic institution became a site of

³¹⁸ "Booking Policy." NYC, NY: The Film-makers Cooperative, 2018; and "Access Request." Canyon Cinema. Canyon Cinema, 2022. <https://canyoncinema.com/clients/rental-inquiry-form/>. Costs were estimates based on both websites and their film listings.

³¹⁹ "Weather Diary 2." Weather Diary 2 | Video Data Bank. Video Data Bank. Accessed March 29, 2023. <https://www.vdb.org/titles/weather-diary-2>.

³²⁰ "About VDB TV." Video Data Bank. Accessed March 29, 2023. <https://www.vdb.org/content/about-vdb-tv>.

dependence or a framework for experimental, avant-garde and/or underground film, then we also have to address the changes in academic institutions since that initial inception or tethering. While higher education has always been a privilege, in recent decades, a college degree has become increasingly necessary for a living wage and stability. The Association of Public & Land Grant Universities (APLU) has published findings that those with a Bachelor's degree are 3.5x less likely to experience poverty, they are only half as likely to be unemployed, and they make, on average, more money than people who only have a high school diploma.³²¹ Furthermore, academic institutions have consistently gotten more expensive to attend, with prices increasing an estimated 179% over the past twenty years.³²² Given this information, and the predatory student loans that so many need in order to attend higher education, how might that change our understanding and acceptance of the academic institution being one of the primary sites and repositories of avant-garde, experimental, and/or queer underground film? Initially this undertaking allowed for a more significant spread and sharing of this kind of content, even as my own experience showcases, but in recent decades, that access to academia and the knowledge and materials that comes with it, has not only become more deeply integral for survival, but also comes with more significant financial burdens.

Considering these changes to academia, does it remain as a framework to share difficult and different content opposed to the mainstream, or does it provide more barriers to access? In my estimation, there is no clear-cut answer and in fact the relationship between academia and this kind of film content is probably resulting in both more barriers and more access – to those who

³²¹ “How Does a College Degree Improve Graduates' Employment and Earnings Potential?” APLU. Association of Public & Land Grant Universities, March 21, 2023. <https://www.aplu.org/our-work/4-policy-and-advocacy/publicvalues/employment-earnings/#11>.

³²² Hanson, Melanie. “Average Cost of College over Time: Yearly Tuition since 1970.” Education Data Initiative, January 9, 2022. <https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-college-by-year>.

are privileged enough to justify and/or afford the cost. Academic institutions were and remain integral to the archiving, categorizing and exhibition of avant-garde, experimental and underground films, but we must continue to press on the question of who gets easy access and who doesn't due to the interweaving between these film traditions and the academic institutions. While the stability and longevity offered by academic institutions is highly important to the history of underground and queer underground film content, we should be continuously wary of the barriers that come with this kind of co-optation. To be clear, this is not to argue that we need to find a home outside of academia for queer underground film to reside, but instead to restate the importance of open access to public communities and to suggest a doubled attention towards the potential barriers that come with setting stakes within higher education. Queer underground films need to be seen beyond the classroom, need to be made available to interested communities beyond students and academics. And the question remains: Will academic institutions even remain as the go-to repositories for queer underground filmmakers, or their films made in the decades following the inception of the internet landscape?

Conclusion

To conclude, this project has taken a geographical attentiveness to the queer underground film movement to express the importance of community upon the movement and its longevity. The work present here offers some taxonomical distinctions for the film movement, namely the four characteristics and the Queer Disgust Aesthetic, but its primary investment was figuring out how integral a surrounding community structure was to the movement and to its resilience over time. Furthermore, this project investigated more deeply the role of the academic institution in screening and sharing queer underground films, providing stabilizing careers for queer underground filmmakers, and how the studio classroom was integral in spreading the

characteristics and sensibilities of the movement, as well as effectively training queer underground filmmakers-to-be. The work also is invested in reviving the work and life of George Kuchar by showing how his career and films present a longer history of a more community-oriented understanding of the queer underground film movement. It is my belief that George and many other unsung members of the initial queer underground film movement require more in-depth studies to eke out the nuances of their work and how it may speak to the sensibilities of the movement.

Of course, the work also opens the door to many new questions. I already raised the questions about how the queer underground film movement has changed over the past two decades, how the role of college institutions may create barriers to access, and more. There are many avenues of thought I didn't follow here, like a more in-depth exploration of the connection between unseriousness and camp, as well as the queer underground film movement as a whole and how camp may have played a role in the works. Continuously, I was also interested in tracking how Kuchar has been taught in college classes and reached out to Christopher Coppola for an interview.³²³ This would be a fascinating project – tracking mentorship between Kuchar and Coppola, among other students, and seeing how Coppola teaches his Studio Kuchar course. Furthermore, looking into other queer underground filmmakers who became educators and exploring how they taught their courses and queer underground content could be another sizeable project. These potential avenues would expand the understanding of the film movement beyond its initial boom and beyond what I was able to accomplish here. The work present here is just the beginning, and hopefully the queer underground film movement, community, and creators like George Kuchar can continue to be a place of exploration for scholars and others. The world of

³²³ Unfortunately, he never responded to my emails.

queer underground films and the community is vast and deep, and I urge interested parties to follow the words of George Kuchar, when asked how he and Mike got involved in underground film, to “Just continue going downhill,” and you’ll find your community.³²⁴

³²⁴ Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997, 19.

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