

EXCERPT

Closure: the gay bathhouse and its discontents

The following are three brief excerpts from Closure. The first two focus on the St. Mark's Baths, drawn from my own and others' research. The third section is from one of the more than forty interviews I have conducted asking men about their relationship to gay baths and saunas.

I. A WORLD INSIDE

Until a few years ago, a plaque affixed to the brick walls of the five-story building at 6 St. Mark's Place, a few doors East of Third Avenue in Manhattan, memorialized the site where, from 1834-1836, the winter residence of novelist James Fenimore Cooper stood. The historic marker made no mention of the seventy years, 1915-1985, during which the current building contained a bathhouse; certain bodies of history remain draped.

On June 9, 1994, Bruce Mailman, the owner of the New St. Mark's Baths since 1977, died at the age of 55 from complications related to AIDS. By that time, 220,000 men, women, and children had died of the disease. Six months before his death, he lost the final appeal to the courts to reopen his bathhouse, which the City of New York closed as a health risk in 1985. The New York State Sanitary Code allowed this closing of commercial establishments if patrons were seen performing vaginal, anal, or oral intercourse. Citing a 1974 case involving the Moose and the Elks Clubs, whose activities had been of a somewhat different character, the Court said in its final judgment that the city had a right to close any place where "the nature of the assemblage is not for the advancement of beliefs or the airing of grievances, but predominantly either for entertainment or personal gratification." During the nine years of this case, the Baths had sulked on St. Mark's Place, waiting for the party to begin again. Many of its former guests had died, and the building became more and more of a relic, an accusation, an uncomfortable and ambiguous symbol of both freedom and loss.

Since Mailman's transformation of the place into the all-gay, all-the-time New St. Mark's Baths in the mid seventies, the place had never locked its doors. When the Health inspectors were sent to padlock the entrance in December of 1985, Mailman was asked for the key for the front door. There was none. It had been a 24-hour, 7 day a week business, having shut down only briefly when one of the bathrooms flooded; tissue paper soaked in a flammable drug, meant to be inhaled, had been thrown in the toilet with a lit match. The toilet exploded. The mess was mopped up, and the Baths were back in business.

Just what that business was lay at the center of the debate over closing. For many men, gay bathhouses were a place where their sexuality was safe, where the moral strictures of the outside world, ignoring or criminalizing their desires, would not rule their bodies. In a demimonde of naked men, sex could be safe, erotic, and enjoyable; a merging of desire and pleasure impossible to achieve outside. Many long-term friendships and love affairs began at the baths, and groups of men would return together, treating the bathhouse as a gathering place, another kind of home. The baths were much safer than the parks or other public cruising areas, the usual dangerous terrain allowed the sexual outlaw. Here was a place where sex could be both sensual and secure. As one patron, AIDS activist Michael Callen, recalled: "The baths invited men to think of their bodies as temples." One could now worship openly within these enclosed spaces...

II. GETTING CLOSE TO THE SUBJECT

I seldom participated in the institutions that defined, in subcultural fashion, the tenor of urban gay male identity in the eighties: The Saint nightclub, the parties on the Pines in Fire Island, The Black Party, the White Party, the Morning Party, the St. Mark's baths; places and events that defined both joy and deviance, casting the heavens with a new roster of angels. That I participated in almost none of them, yet feel as if I did, or should have, is testament to their place as myth, and the triumph of "lifestyle" over one's actual life.

Most of the sites, have been boarded up, knocked down, or sold. The legendary parties are held "in exile" at rented halls. Bruce Mailman, owner of the St. Mark's Baths and the Saint, is dead; that he died of AIDS is either completely relevant, cruelly ironic, or both. We seek connections, and we would like to point the finger, or at least put our finger on the problem, but it always slides out from underneath. He is dead, and his business, the ON Company, survived to sell off his assets. The temple of the body is fleeting, and temporary replacement is the pattern of pop culture. In 1985, the doors to Mailman's temple were padlocked, the result of the early agony over AIDS, an agony that at the time seemed a passing thing; if only the causative agent could be found and our behavior educated and (self) regulated. We assumed that AIDS was an aberration, a single bad check passed on a path to prosperity and acceptance. No films were ever shot in the bathhouse, and the few existing photographs were taken when it was empty. The life lived there does not exist except as memory. Many of those who would remember have died. Perhaps it would have been more dignified to simply vanish, on a street like St. Mark's, where pop culture precariously reigns. Perhaps the bathhouse should have simply disappeared, burned down like the St. Mark's Church just a block away, and lovingly rebuilt by order of the community. Instead, the building's disappearance came as a makeover, not a tear-down; a new facade for a new market. The St. Mark's is now a video store. If we can't live life, at least we can rent it...

VI. ONLY CONNECT: NIGHTS (AND DAYS) IN A BATHHOUSE 1960-2000

1. No Regrets: 1962-80

In 1962, Brad came to New York from Washington, D.C. to visit a friend of his father: "I think you will get along with him very well." This friend, the gay, alcoholic black sheep of a wealthy insurance family, sized him up: "You're a very nervous boy; you should go to the baths." And so the twenty-two year old made his first trek to the Penn Post Baths, between the General Post Office and Pennsylvania Station, a good location for a young man in transition. Brad descended the stairway to the entrance, where one paid before entering the baths proper (or improper). Before sliding into activity, he was directed to a small changing room to don the iconic uniform of towel around waist. Suitably undressed, Brad wandered into the main space, scattered with bunk beds. There were only two rooms to explore, the other being the steam room at the end of a long hall. Both were crowded, pressing the newcomer into contact. A visitor found it difficult to simply watch, as the physical dimensions of the place pulled the viewer into action. This interaction was tactile, with eye contact avoided. To Brad, a particularly shy young man, this made the experience all the more sexual, while adding an unexpected aura of modesty: "It wasn't demure, it was male after all. But there was still modesty in gay life then, a masculine modesty." Although there were no private rooms at this bathhouse, a bunk bed could be colonized for a couple, a trio, or even a soloist observing. The steam room, the bunk house, the halls, all were public spaces, but this public shared the collective heat of desire, which filled up any available space.

When Brad returned from his expedition, his host greeted him with the question "My dear, did you find love?" to which the still glowing Brad responded that he had not,

but he did have a really good time. Later that year, he did indeed find a long term lover at the baths, a discovery he describes now as "a major mistake." Brad was not looking for permanence and commitment (he was only twenty-two), but something more satisfying than the blow jobs offered by younger men to older in D.C.'s Lafayette Park. In the baths, the outer world did not enter at all. "When the doors closed, you really were in another world. What was out there stayed out." Even some of the rigid demarcations of age were fluid inside the baths. In the nineteen sixties, a young gay man carried with him the belief that he must make the best of his youth, for by age thirty-five, he was sure to be "washed-up," and part of that older cohort in some urban park, prey to the cruelties of the ousted world. Looking back now, a still adventurous older man, Brad realizes the folly of such a rigid chronology, but back then "I believed it." Yet entering the baths, he saw a broader mix of ages, and acts, than those available in a public park. Things truly were different inside; "The door closed, you paid your money, and you were in your own world."...

CHAPTER OUTLINE

(chapters marked << are completed)

1. A Place For Us?

Theaters, baths, and nightclubs; a case history in gay entrepreneurship, visibility, and the marketing of "lifestyle. How the New Saint Mark's changed the gay bathhouse.

1.1. <<A World Inside: Brief history of baths in New York City, and the rise of Bruce Mailman and the St. Mark's Baths.

2. Getting Close to the Subject: A first person account of the meaning of the baths. How I came to write this book.

2.1. <<Closure

3. Keep it Clean: Temples of the Body Gyms, saunas, spas: a brief history and cultural overview of the U.S. and other cultures: Turkish, Jewish, English, Greek, Japanese, Eastern European. Public Baths in history and literature.

4. Getting Close to the Subject My experience of non-gay bathhouses

4.1. Budapest

4.2. London

4.3. New York City Russian Baths

5. A Proper Place for Perverts?

5.1. Gay gathering places through the 19th Century.

5.1.1. <<London

5.1.2. New York and America

5.2. 20th Century:

5.2.1. New York City Piers, The Rambles, 42nd Street

6. Only Connect: Nights (and days) in a bathhouse 1960-2000 The role of the bathhouse in creating a gay identity, and the issues of privacy and safety. The details of desire: what is/what was a bathhouse. Locations, designs, features. (much material will be in interview form).

6.1. <<No Regrets: 1962-80 An interview with a sixty year old New Yorker

6.2. The Continental Drift: remembrances of a cabaret /bathhouse

6.3. Additional Interviews. Some individual, others in group format

7. We're Strangers When We Meet: Interviews with men who men who met long-term partners in the baths. How public sex connects with their private relationship. Interviews with couples and/or one member of couple. (this Chapter may be combined with preceding, depending on material)

- 7.1. <<We met in Covent Garden: Interview
- 7.2. <<What was your grandfather's name? A story
- 7.3. Additional Interviews

8. Getting Close to the Subject

- 8.1. <<My experiences in gay baths in America
- 8.2. <<Experiences in England and Europe (partial)

9. Other Voices, Other Rooms Women's bathhouses (lesbian and straight).

- 9.1. An insider's report from "Flirt," the women's night at Covent Garden Baths
- 9.2. Rita Mae Brown at the Club Baths 1975. Excerpts from her essay and other women's writing on bathhouses and sex.

10. From Paradise to Pariah: the changing role of the gay bathhouse in New York City 1970-1985. The battles over closure in New York City. Putting the gloves on, taking the doors off?

- 10.1. Interviews with past and present bathhouse owners and Health agency administrators
- 10.2. Defenses and attacks, Whose side are you on? Interviews, research of the history and literature of mid-eighties closure battles.

11. Touch Sensitive: bathhouse battles outside New York during the first decade of AIDS. Legal cases, statistics, documents, demonstrations

- 11.1. San Francisco
- 11.2. London
- 11.3. Montreal

12. Making Love Under Radar/Bodies in motion: Public Sex since 1985 Sex Clubs, gay personals, phone sex, internet sex. How has the nature of "anonymous" sex changed? The role of video and advertising in changing the way we look at ourselves and others. The role of the bathhouse in the evolution of images of perfection and fantasy

- 12.1. <<Interviews with men of varying ages
- 12.2. <<Making Love Under Radar. Research and analysis of data and interviews

13. Getting Close to the Subject

- 13.1. <<The Romance of Perfection and Impermanence

14. Who you calling a slut? Defining promiscuity

- 14.1. Definitions from interviewees
- 14.2. Sex Panic!? Michaelangelo Signorile, Michael Warner, Larry Kramer, Allen Berube, Walt Odets. The battles within gay culture over sexual behavior in the nineties. Review of the literature, the rhetoric, and the repercussions.
- 14.3. What do we do with ourselves now? Sexual behavior in public

15. Epilogue: Getting Close to the Subject:

How the writing of this book affected my own life and behavior.
Placed throughout the book: Fiction and Fact: Cinematic, literary, and visual art depictions of the gay bathhouse. Photos, reproductions of paintings and drawings of baths (disbursed throughout book)

16. Bibliography

17. Acknowledgments and Sources

18. Index

SYNOPSIS

One of the most contentious issues in American society concerns the definition of public morality and public space. In particular, gay sexual culture has been at the forefront of debates over the propriety of public sex (or any purely recreational sex at all). In the mid-eighties, this argument spiraled-out from the battle over whether to close down gay bathhouses. Because of the particular path of the AIDS virus in this country, discussion regarding public sex has focused on gay men, and on the bathhouse in particular. The doors of many such places were forced open, not necessarily to foster honesty and openness, but to serve political expediency.

In the first two chapters of Closure, I begin by tracing the history of the St. Mark's Baths, a gay mecca in early eighties New York, as well as the history of public bathhouses in general. From that factual and historical material, I build a second chapter that is much more subjective, breaking into the historical account with a personal narrative of my own visits to a gay bathhouse. As readers are most often drawn to facts which are integrated and offset with stories, that discursive balance is a critical part of my writing, moving between reportorial, anecdotal, and analytical treatments to open up a closed world.

In expanding Closure, I am enlarging my examination of public sex and sexuality by adding more anecdotal information, gleaned through interviews with former (and current) bathhouse patrons, as well as the principals involved in creating and running the St. Mark's and other bathhouses in New York, San Francisco, London, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. In this way, the diverse and contradictory responses to sexuality, via the evolution and public perception of the gay bathhouse, will be revealed. I will be interviewing long-term couples who began their relationships in the baths, as well as those in the gay community who question whether the baths are even capable of instigating such permanence. Through such anecdotes and histories, I will link real lives to such concepts as promiscuity, fidelity, safety, and morality. These stories will be balanced by factual material linking the mid-eighties bathhouse closings under the Koch administration to the recent cleansing of New York City by the Giuliani administration. Having written (in *The New York Blade News*) on the controversy over the closing of the West Side piers, I will also relate recent protests over the disappearance and/or policing of other public spaces where gay men gather (the Rambles of Central Park, the piers, Washington Square Park), to the controversy over the baths, and the overall constriction and privatization of public space.

The book will be designed for a broad audience, pairing intellectual debates and arguments with personal stories (mine and others') to illustrate how the gay bathhouse played a key part in the development of current images and assumptions about sex and sexuality. This evolving perception of what is "safe" and what is "clean" will be a major theme of the book, as will the changing definition of privacy, commitment, and freedom, and the stability of these concepts in society.

While the book will initially use the St. Mark's as an example, I will be examining the political and social responses to gay bathhouses in several American cities, as well as in London, Amsterdam, Montreal, and possibly Tokyo. Corollary to that will be a discussion of bathhouses in other cultures, and the place of sexual behavior in them. In Chapter 1, I provide a short history of public bathing in New York City; an additional chapter will touch briefly on public bathing, nakedness, and sensuality in the Japanese sento, Jewish mikvah, Turkish hammam, and the European health spa culture.

As part of the history of our changing attitudes toward bathhouses, I will contrast the legal and political issues involved in the closing of the St. Mark's in New York, and all bathhouses in San Francisco, while those in Montreal remained open and visible. The book will provide a brief chronology of laws that govern morality as they pertain to the

baths and to the use of public space for sexual behavior, while bringing in literary (fictional as well as non-fictional) and cinematic accounts of bathhouses and gay sexual behavior. It is through an understanding of this legislative, judicial, and cultural history that I will frame the current argument over proper sexual behavior for gay men. Incorporating this debate between pro-monogamy activists (Larry Kramer, Michelangelo Signorile, Gabriel Rotello) and advocates of sexual freedom (Michael Warner, *Sex Panic!*), the book will in particular explore the definition of "promiscuity," a word which has seen its meaning change radically in the past twenty years.

Although numerous bathhouses were closed down in the mid-eighties, many still exist, or have metamorphosed into sex clubs, theme restaurants, or traveling parties. I will chronicle how the existing establishments have adapted, both before and after the onset of AIDS, to the strictures of public health, and how the very character of exchanges that occur in such places of public sex may have changed. How did the growth of pornographic videos, and their introduction into these dark spaces, change sexual behavior? Were sexual exchanges transformed (as Daniel Harris argues in [The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture](#))? I will also specifically explore the contrast between New York, London, and San Francisco's response to the AIDS crisis in relation to bathhouses, and discover what effect such measures as removing doors from rooms had on sexual behavior in the baths. Did this encourage a more public intimacy, or make gay sex more of a performance? How did these sometimes well-meaning public health efforts affect gay intimacy, privacy, and safety? Have subsequent AIDS prevention approaches been built on misconstruals of gay sexuality (as Walt Odets suggests in his [In The Shadow of an Epidemic](#))? Through examination of one aspect of gay subculture, larger issues within the culture may be reviewed.

There are not many photos of gay bathhouses, but I continue to hunt for images to use in the book. The photographer Dona Ann McAdams, whose book [Caught in the Act](#) was published by Aperture, would provide a photo of a demonstration in front of the St. Mark's before it closed. I will also go through the archives of the Gay and Lesbian Center in New York, The One Institute in Los Angeles, and the International Museum of Gay/Lesbian History in San Francisco to collect ephemera (photos, advertisements) relating to the baths. Additional illustrations to consider might be Charles Demuth's watercolors of bathhouses from the 1910's, Bill Jacobson's haunting photographs of blurry, ghostlike figures, Stephen Barker's dark and hazy photos of men in sex clubs, and Robert Flynt's photographs of bodies suspended in water (none of these photographers have bathhouses as their subject, yet their work evokes them). The Wessell+O'Connor Gallery and the Leslie Lohman Gallery, both of whom show gay-themed photography, will be consulted as part of this search.

Writing on sex can suffer from being either rigidly analytical or blurred by personal involvement. Although, as chronicled in the second chapter of [Closure](#), I have been an occasional patron of gay bathhouses, they were not a central part of my early sexual development. While doing research for this project, the complicated and shifting meaning of safety revealed itself to me, as did the shadings of what is public and what is private in sexuality. After having been intellectually intrigued by the debate over bathhouses, I have deepened my research to include actual participation, an anthropological stance that can be revealing when the boundaries are clear to the reader. Combing through material on public sexuality, I have discovered connections and experienced epiphanies, and in my more applied research have found my own responses to be both tonic and troubling. This book is an attempt to compare and contrast some of my own sexual narratives with those of a larger subculture, one to which I have an uneasy relationship. To debate the place of the gay bathhouse in contemporary society, we have to understand its context and history, placing it within a continuum that leads

both into, and out of, the historical fact of AIDS. We need to be honest about our own involvement in the sexual culture, and acknowledge the way in which research can become a personal journey; one that might create illumination where there has been isolation.

Although there have been a few other articles about the gay bathhouse, there are none that connect personal, anecdotal narratives with historical, factual material in a non-academic fashion. Regardless of their sexual orientation, colleagues to whom I have described the project respond that such a book is both timely and overdue, and needs to be written by someone whose stance is not polemical or partisan. I think the enclosed indicates that I am that person. This book will be an essential contribution to gay historical studies, social and cultural studies, oral history, and the evolving relationship between cities, sex, and the law. The bathhouse was an enclosed space, and this book is an attempt to reveal what the walls, and the activities occurring within them, represent in the development of gay subculture.

For the past twenty years, I have been known primarily as a performance artist, writer, choreographer, and filmmaker, receiving eight fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts. Most of my performance work has been distinguished by extensive use of text, which I compose as part of the live performance. In addition to my performance work, I have written numerous nonfiction essays, focusing on personal, political, and cultural subjects, and been published in *The New England Review*, *Threepenny Review*, *New York Blade News*, *City Limits*, *Performing Arts Journal*, *Teaching Tolerance*, *XXX Fruit*, *Movement Research Journal*, and several other journals and books. In 1996, I began work toward an MFA in the Writing Division of the School of the Arts at Columbia, awarded in October 1998. My thesis project, a memoir entitled Safe As Houses: One Artist's Life in New York City 1980-1990, traces the evolution of my life as an artist in New York and the defining role two pieces of real estate played; Performance Space 122, and my low income co-op in the Lower East Side. Although it is a separate project from Closure, both focus on the shifting nature of personal and social history. In recognition of my work on Closure, I received a Paul Monette/Roger Horwitz Trust Research and Scholarship Award for 2001. Based on my research on this subject, I was invited to present a lecture regarding bathhouses for the 2004 meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, Western Division, in San Diego.

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