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Absent Essentials: Queer Visualizations of Outlawed Nudity and Sex in Mid-Twentieth-Century Physique Magazines and Photographs

Against the backdrop of the intense anti-queer Lavender Scare, mid-twentieth-century queer visual culture in the United States centered on practices of concealing and revealing to avoid and work against censorship. These practices epitomize queer men's concurrent desire to see and be seen as sexual subjects and their need for the safety of privacy. Queer absences in archival materials produced by and for queer men suggest, as this article argues, the paradox of censorship: a hyperfocus on queer sex and the male crotch, especially the penis, that is visualized and emphasized across mid-twentieth-century physique photography and magazines, scrapbooks, and drawings. Central to this is the interplay between (self-)censorship and queer agency.

Keywords: queer photography; queer archives; visual culture; scrapbooks; physique magazines; homoeroticism

A black-and-white studio photograph features a reclining man, wearing nothing but his socks. He holds a straight softcore or so-called cheesecake magazine in his left hand and looks at it while masturbating (fig. 1). This scene unfolds in the living room of a bourgeois home, as suggested by the rather prim pictures hanging on the wall behind him. In front of the sofa, an ashtray, more magazines, a white sailor's hat, an open can of beer, a cup, and a liquor carafe stand on a coffee table. Clothes are arranged on the couch's backrest: dark pants, a jacket with the service stripes of a U.S. Navy sailor's uniform, a white tank top, and white bikini-cut briefs. This photograph of an unknown model named George Walker was taken by studio owner and physique photographer Pat Milo, the working alias of James Patrick.¹

Milo took about 40 photographs of Walker, most or all during this one session inside an apartment.² They show Walker undressing, smoking a cigarette, having a beer, relaxing on the couch, displaying his penis through the fly of his sailor pants, and masturbating on the sofa and a bed. In a few of the images, Walker appears in the nude in a dark studio space with no visible background, posing in the manner of antique statues or bodybuilders. Nothing is known of Walker except that he also modeled for Bob Mizer, the editor of *Physique Pictorial*, which was the first as well as one of the highest-circulating so-called physique magazines of its time, in Los Angeles around 1960.³ We can date Milo's photographs of Walker to approximately the same time because the magazine in Walker's hand is the 1959 issue of the straight pinup magazine *Touch*, as other photographs in the series reveal.

This photograph of a cheerfully masturbating young Walker is emblematic of the predominantly white, middle-class, U.S.-American queer visual culture that emerged after World War II.

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/zkg-2025-3007>



1 Pat Milo, *George Walker*, ca. 1960, photograph. Present whereabouts unknown

The models who posed for physique photographers were usually aspiring actors or bodybuilders in big cities such as Los Angeles and not necessarily queer themselves. If they were, the pinup magazine might have been a cover to hide the intention of creating images of nude men for men who bought and collected these pictures.

Photographic solo sets regularly advanced the narrative of exciting undressing, with the models using different poses to present their bodies; most models had muscular physiques. However, this photo could neither be published nor shipped until the later 1960s due to full-frontal nudity, let alone Walker's erection and visible

masturbation. So, why does it exist? How is it related to the strategic evasion of censorship with which American queer visual culture circa 1960 is imbued?

This article explores how censorship shaped queer image-making and how makers and viewers negotiated the forced absence of images of nudity and sex in mid-twentieth-century imagery. An aesthetic of semi-visibility became a central queer visual strategy. My argument is that, while they are often hidden, queer desire, nudity, and sexual acts were very much present in queer visual culture during the 1950s and 1960s—a period of intense hostility to and criminalization of queerness during the time of McCarthyism, the Lavender Scare, Hollywood’s Hays Code, mail censorship, and legal and social discrimination and marginalization.⁴ While the images are tame from today’s point of view, in the mid-twentieth century the photographers, sellers, and buyers risked jail time, public humiliation, fines, and raids. I argue that an overemphasis on necessarily absent essentials is apparent in mid-twentieth-century materials and that it oscillates between self-censorship and self-empowerment, visibility and invisibility, defiance and conformity. Contemporaneous as well as contemporary beholders could and can activate these absences through modes of imagination to realize their significance and that of the people behind and in the images.

Numerous studies have focused on queer art from this period, but scholars have generally remained silent about most of the broader queer visual culture upon which I focus.⁵ My intervention is to engage viewers’ reception practices of queer materials and to analyze these materials’ visual strategies. Until now, queer studies has generally avoided physique magazines and photography as well as their reception as research objects, likely due to the overwhelmingly white and muscular bodies they depict, which seem to represent a hegemonic ideal rather than what contemporary beholders would consider queer

bodies.⁶ Because of queer studies’ anachronistic misconception of those bodies via the reduction of physique magazines and photography to the models’ physiques, it seems that physique culture was framed as gay male culture. And yet, these should be essential objects of study in the field of queer studies, not least because physique magazines and photography reached their peak circulation concurrently with the broader aesthetic climax of coded postwar queer visual culture in the early to mid-1960s, followed by its commercial decline due to a lack of innovation in the formal vocabulary, the saturation of the market, the emergence of gay identity, and the hard-won availability of a less coded, blunt gay visual culture, especially gay pornography.⁷ The lack of scholarly engagement with these examples of homoerotica and illicit queer pornography from a queer studies perspective may have been the result of perceptions that this queer visual culture was a precursor to gay male visual culture or that it represents a hegemonic male ideal. These framings ignore the queerness in the images and form an act of epistemological violence that I upend by tracing absences in this imagery as ambiguous and ambivalent signifiers. As my article shows, gay visual culture’s paradigm of visibility could not be further from the oscillating visibility and strategic use of semi-visibility in mid-twentieth-century queer visual culture. Indeed, it is closer to contemporary notions of queerness than is initially visible.

Queer visual culture’s archival absences are countless. Essential missing materials range from entire estates, artists’ oeuvres, and types of media that never reached an archive, to items that were archived but remain inaccessible due to statutes of limitations and embargos. Also often missing are hard facts, such as individuals’ names, biographical context, and provenance.⁸ Despite these absences, the archival holdings regarding pre-Stonewall U.S.-American queer imagery are significant and extensive. As Barry Reay argues, queer archival holdings are “the

pockets of recorded desire, located in the most respectable repositories.”⁹ Yet we can move even beyond Reay’s approach, by discussing the richness of queer histories through representational absences in queer materials that can likewise be understood as “pockets of recorded desire.” Such absences can be pictorial elements that are covered, obscured, or cut out; they also include absences at the level of images’ motifs and subjects.¹⁰

Queer mid-twentieth-century print media worked with an aesthetic of semi-visibility couched within necessary exclusions and exaggerations. This visual culture was as visibly queer as possible and as invisibly queer as necessary. Queer subjects used codes and camouflage in representation and daily practice, as Jonathan Katz points out: “The social universe of sexual desire, in painting, as in life, is so often of necessity communicated through the most subtle gestures, glances, and codes. When the desire in question is literally illegal, it is all the more fugitive [...].”¹¹ That these allusions, metaphors, and symbols were historically understood will be central to my argument. The following will focus on distinct absences of full-frontal nudity, especially of the crotch, and of queer sex in physique magazines and photographs—and how they were countered by physique photographers and magazine editors as well as by customers at home who visualized absences in their drawings, directly in the magazines or in scrapbooks. Such forced absences—the necessarily implicit, excluded, or alluded to—reveal personal, cultural, material, aesthetic, and sexual histories. First, I discuss practices of concealment by early physique photographers in the 1930s and ’40s that involved the customers’ interaction with the images and formed bonds between the depicted and the customer as well as the photographer and the buyer. Subsequently, I address the absence of nudity and queer sex in published physique photographs and magazines and how this absence was emphasized and ridiculed. Finally,

private, unpublished drawings will reveal themselves as proof of the adequacy of these iterative allusions and as the extreme end of a spectrum of queer visibility, which can, in the end, explain how Milo’s illicit photograph of a nude, masturbating man became possible in impossible times.

Rubbing the Crotch: Image Manipulation in Early Physique Photography

In the early days of male physique photography made for men, for example by Al Urban or Alonzo ‘Lon’ Hanagan in the 1930s and ’40s, the male models were usually shot in the nude, and the photographers had to either retouch the negatives or cover the pubic area in each positive print with ink or watercolor.¹² This painstaking but potentially libidinous image manipulation allowed photographers to sell photographs of nude men who appeared clothed. Such practices set queer physique culture apart from the earlier heteronormative physical culture movement and its publications as well as from contemporaneous bodybuilding and fitness magazines that centered on health, strength, and fitness, which queer physique photographers used only as a blueprint and an alibi to focus on the male body’s erotic appeal.¹³ Covering the crotch with ink or paint is, however, directly related to what Thomas Waugh theorized as the “absence of the penis” in early physical culture publications. He notes that “the majority of the Physical Culture poses are the stern frontal assertion of phallic power that are still all too familiar [...]. While the bulk of some other muscle is often accentuated, the athlete’s arms—taut, rigid, flexed, swollen, interlinked, outstretched, or upheld—repeatedly acquire the graphic status of surrogate phallus.”¹⁴ The absent yet present crotch covered with ink or paint is one such effect of the ‘absence of the penis.’ Even today, traces remain on the surfaces of some of the early queer physique photographs from the 1930s and ’40s, as we see in one example



2 Al Urban, *George Kuchler*, late 1930s, photograph. San Francisco, GLBT Historical Society, Roméo L'Heureux Photographs, coll. no. 2000-33

from the middle of this period (fig. 2): The paint that was supposed to remain until eradicated by the customer at home is still partially present, and George Kuchler's pubic area is half-visible. Rubbing or scratching off the pigment seems to have damaged the photograph slightly, which could explain why the owner stopped short of fully removing it. Alternatively, he might have been interrupted or preferred the half-revealed sight. It can be assumed that the buyer rubbed a finger with some spit on this model's pubic hair, penis, and scrotum, potentially while masturbating, to erase the ink or watercolor. The damage on the photograph's surface from rubbing or scratching off ink or paint does not represent the will to damage or hurt the model. Therefore, it does not constitute a "substitutive image act," which Horst Bredekamp analyzed as the equa-

tion of image and body in the case of iconoclasm.¹⁵ On the contrary, the customer desired and wanted to see this model's initially hidden penis and therefore set to rubbing or scratching. Despite the aggression behind rubbing and especially scratching something off, the remaining ink is proof of a libidinous act that is based not on violence but desire. These acts of desire pervade queer archival holdings: Countless queer men used their jerk-off materials as substitutes for actual men; doing so required damaging images. Traces of wear are signs of past pleasure and the will to see.

The queer creation of an absence *and* presence as an early form of do-it-yourself culture enabled a dynamic between man and image that cannot be overestimated: a man's lust for making visible the invisible, for freeing the penis and thus freeing himself by allowing himself to gaze at what is forbidden—acts silently condoned by another man, the photographer, who has already seen what the consumer gets to reveal at home. This erotic dynamic must have shaped queer customers' perception of themselves as queer, of men in general, of male nudity and corporeality, of medialized representations of men, of playful censorship, and of the power of photography. These photo-based practices enabled queer men to relate to other queer men via the images' figurative representation of a man *and* the photographer as a real man. To reveal those absences and understand them, one must follow traces that signify absence and presence, as Peter Weibel clarifies in his adaptation of Jacques Derrida's deconstructivist philosophy of the trace. Weibel relates the trace to the aesthetics of absence: "The dissolving, shifting, and referencing as instances of the dynamic of the trace, as processuality of the trace, certainly form strategies (of the trace) that belong to the canon of an aesthetic of absence."¹⁶ It is precisely this dynamic of the trace—"dissolving, shifting, and referencing"—, of "ephemeral evidence," as José Esteban Muñoz defined it regarding queer culture, that

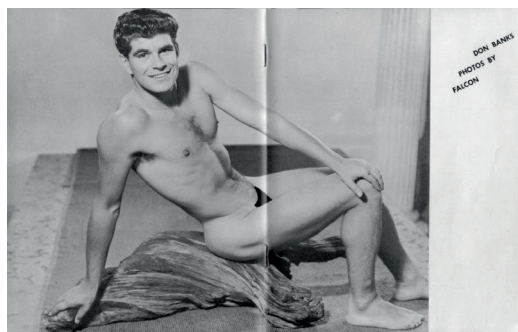
can make an absence and its potential meanings apparent.¹⁷ The manifest trace of paint or ink and the beholder's trace of his tactile interaction with the picture are evidence of queerness because, without it, this image of a nude man could pass as just another photograph of a bodybuilder or a nude study for art students. Traces such as these reveal the fulfillment of queer longing and historical self-protection.

Increasing Pleasure, Increasing Sales: (Full Nudity) and (Sex) in Mid-Century Physique Magazines and Photographs

After World War II, homoerotic physique magazines were created by and for queer men. They advertised and sold their own or other studios' physique photographs, and later also color slides as well as 8- and 16-mm film. *Physique Pictorial* was likely the first of these magazines, published from 1951 on.¹⁸ Physique imagery charts a category of queer imagery related to male same-sex desire through photographic scopophilic practices and the ambiguous absence of visualizations of nudity and sex. The Post Office Department was allowed to confiscate 'obscene' materials, which were seen as 'nonmailable,' until the landmark *MANual Enterprises, Inc. vs. Day* Supreme Court decision in 1962. However, before and even long after this step towards the legalization of mailing erotic and nude imagery, physique photographers sent customers their existing nudes (that never made it into the magazines) upon request by mail with specific statements and instructions on the back of the photograph to protect themselves and their customers from legal actions.¹⁹ Others personally delivered the illicit versions of specific photographs, which was likely the case with Pat Milo's photographs that I initially discussed.²⁰ Physique photographers became more and more inventive and created new pictorial strategies to allude to their nudes, which economically strength-

ened their position: Since nudes could only be bought upon request, customers had to first buy the magazines, and the catalogs and photograph sets advertised in them, to decide which nudes they might request. More importantly, pointing out unaltered versions of the same photographs pushed the limits of censorship and revealed its severity and ridiculousness by simultaneously adhering to the law and mocking it tongue in cheek.

The technique of covering the crotch in developed photographs with ink or paint, as done by pioneering physique photographers such as Al Urban, needed to be modified when physique magazines gained popularity and visibility, for example on newsstands, which ruled out manipulating single positives. Hence, countless unmistakably, sometimes badly, sometimes artfully retouched photographs from the 1950s and '60s show white areas that represent that the pubic area was dodged, scratched, or cut out; black areas in place of the crotch that were burned, cut out, or blacked out with ink; and drawings of fig leaves or simplified, schematic underwear which were added to cover the crotch before the image was reproduced.²¹ Before a photograph of a smiling Don Banks by Falcon, a studio run by Richard 'Dick' Falcon, was published as the centerfold in the magazine *MANORAMA* in 1962, the crotch had been covered with black ink or



3 *MANORAMA*, January 1962, no. 7, centerfold: Don Banks, photographed by Richard 'Dick' Falcon



4 Richard Fontaine, *Darrel Stoneman*, 1960s, four photographs. Los Angeles, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries, Erotic and Physique Photography Collection, coll. no. 2014-051, box 26

paint, or the negative was burned (fig. 3). Banks's somewhat strained but inviting smile as he turns towards the camera and the beholder, perched rather awkwardly on a piece of driftwood, all seem but a frame for the blacked-out crotch in the middle of the fold. What this form of self-censorship on the part of the image communicated is not only that the photographer had seen the model in the nude but that the full-frontal version might still be available.

Other photographers who did not photograph models in the nude or those who did not want their published semi-nudes to evoke existing nudes dressed their models in so-called posing straps or other kinds of campy underwear, sometimes made from shiny gold-colored or mesh fabrics or featuring animal prints. In some photographs, posing straps partially revealed pubic hair or even penis and scrotum silhouettes. Photographers also used other material aids, such as a curtain or a column—long typical elements of portraiture and history painting—to hide the pubic area, which, in turn, led to a charged play with props.²² The resulting pictures oscillate between the symbolic (phallus surrogates) and the sexual, which sometimes takes the form of an object fetish (props as sex toys, props instead of another man). A set of four photographs of model Darrel Stoneman by RA Enterprises (Richard 'Dick' Fontaine), likely from the early 1960s, is an example of the playful highlighting of the crotch (fig. 4). In the top left photo, Stoneman sits on a mid-century cocktail chair that is partially draped with bright fabric. He poses between two marbleized columns. In the background, a monstera leaf and a neo-classical fluted column, slightly covered by a dark net, are visible. As to the hidden presence of the crotch, the top left photograph clearly shows that Stoneman is not wearing underwear for the photo shoot. Instead, he holds a pseudo-antique accessory that could be a waist belt with his left hand, which reveals a tiny part of Stoneman's pubic hair. This gesture signifies that the model had

taken off the waist belt just before the photographer took this photo or that the model wanted to put it on but was interrupted by the photographer. The top right photograph, however, shows Stoneman with a dreamy mien in a set devoid of clutter, with only a few monstera leaves on the left and the net hanging from above, which he grabs with both arms. A dark piece of fabric that goes all the way up to his right shoulder and around his back covers his crotch. This dark drape contrasts with the white background and covers much more surface than necessary, again accentuating the crotch. In both photographs on the bottom, Stoneman wears a neo-antique costume of Roman sandals, a cape, and a large, high-waisted, gold-colored posing strap. Its size and especially its shine attract the beholder immediately.²³ The bottom right image further stresses the crotch because Stoneman adopts a phallic position with a much more sincere expression. While all four photographs were taken in the same studio with similar props, only those on the bottom reveal that the columns on the model's left- and right-hand sides are detached and shorter than the model himself. The columns make the model seem larger than life, and the thin spear in his left hand amplifies the phallic allusion. Furthermore, the artificiality based on a light-minded approach towards historical specificity illustrates that the photographer and the model were interested in the model's sex appeal and physique, not antiquity.

More detailed is the photograph of Don Fuller that was published on the back of *Grecian Guild Pictorial* in 1957 to advertise a new softcore physique movie titled *In the Flesh* by Apollo studio (fig. 5). As Apollo was also run by Richard Fontaine, he most likely took this photograph of Fuller in a half-kneeling posture from a slight high-angle perspective. What makes this photograph visually similar to those of Stoneman is its incoherent, eclectic, and multichronic aesthetic. The neo-antique, heroic, and melodramatic Hollywood pose is complicated by props, such as a

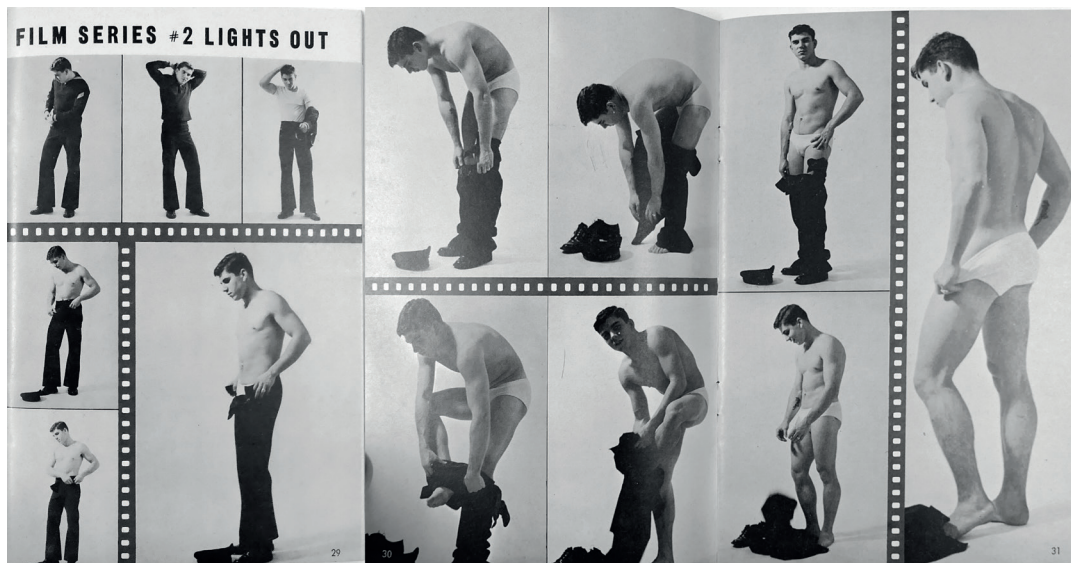


5 *Grecian Guild Pictorial* 2, November 1957, no. 6, back cover, caption: "Hollywood actor Don Fuller in costume for his starring role in the new Apollo physique movie, *In the Flesh*, Don Fuller, photographed by Richard Fontaine." Los Angeles, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries, Physique Magazine Collection

little wooden bench in the nineteenth-century Renaissance Revival style, a small pseudo-antique sword or dagger, and a cloak that recalls ancient Greek chlamys cloaks. The multichronic historicism and eclecticism are brought up to date by a mid-century window, curtains, and sunburst mirror in the background. It is antiquity realized against the backdrop of the photograph's time and place: mid-century Los Angeles.²⁴ However, the 1960s mirror in the middle of the sunburst frame is covered over by a grotesque mask that might depict Kinich Ahau, the Maya sun god. All these props show a half-hearted attempt to again highlight the image's own performativity, or its lack of commitment to its own

historical artifice. A shimmery gold-colored loincloth, which also serves as a waistband that holds the dagger's sheath, covers the model's gold-colored posing strap. In sum, what is forbidden in mid-century imagery is emphasized in physique photographs through visual excess, the material effects of shine, allusive posture, camp aesthetics of great bad taste (the eclecticism and historical sloppiness), a crotch only just covered, as well as through symbols and metaphors, such as swords and columns, that all highlight the centrality of the crotch.²⁵

In other cases—as in a three-page sequence that appeared in *Champ Annual* in 1962 showing a model dressed as a sailor who undresses across 13 photographs—the excitement continuously increases through narrative, format, and form (fig. 6). The first five smaller photographs on the first page are relatively insignificant for viewers because they feature the model either fully dressed or merely shirtless. All subsequent images are almost four times the size. The increase in the viewer's suspense would have correlated with the growing size of the pile of clothes in front of the model. In the last photograph on the right, the young man is represented from behind, as he teasingly begins to take off his white briefs. However, instead of a climax, the observer experiences a visual coitus interruptus with this final image. In the use of the page format—with the allusion to film and the homosocial space of the Navy via the title (*Film Series #2 Lights Out*)—the reader is hopeful yet aware that there is nothing to see. Turning the page does not result in complete revelation, but hope remains that one day it might. Thus, the absence of sex and clear views of most male erogenous zones is thematized in narrative renderings in continuous form but never resulted in actual nudes; censorship was too strict to risk it. However, some photographers did risk it, and that is what kept hope alive for their large audience. Milo's series discussed at the beginning shows all that could not be published in a magazine. Therefore, the

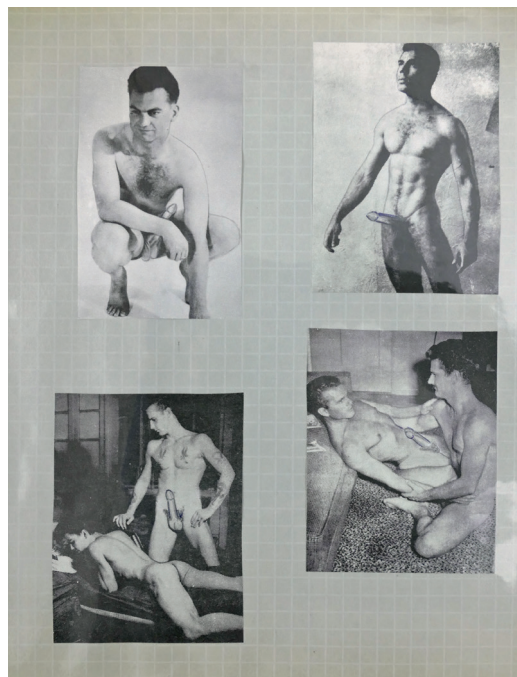


6 *Champ Annual*, New York 1962, 29 – 31, photographer and model no longer known. Los Angeles, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries, Physique Magazine Collection

revelation of full nudity was only possible in unpublished photographs to which those narrative collages alluded.

Allusions Unveiled: Drawing the Illicit at Home

The allusions in published photographs—which can be considered almost implicit instructions—resulted in a phenomenon that remains, to date, completely unstudied: customers (with various levels of skill) drew testicles, penises, and semen on physique photographs either directly in physique magazines or in photographic reproductions that they collaged in scrapbooks, sometimes in layouts that allude to sex between the male figures. For instance, a scrapbook by a now unknown maker, housed at the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco, features rough-grained photocopies of physique photographs and cut-out reproductions from magazines (fig. 7). Four similar black-and-white photocopies on this page show



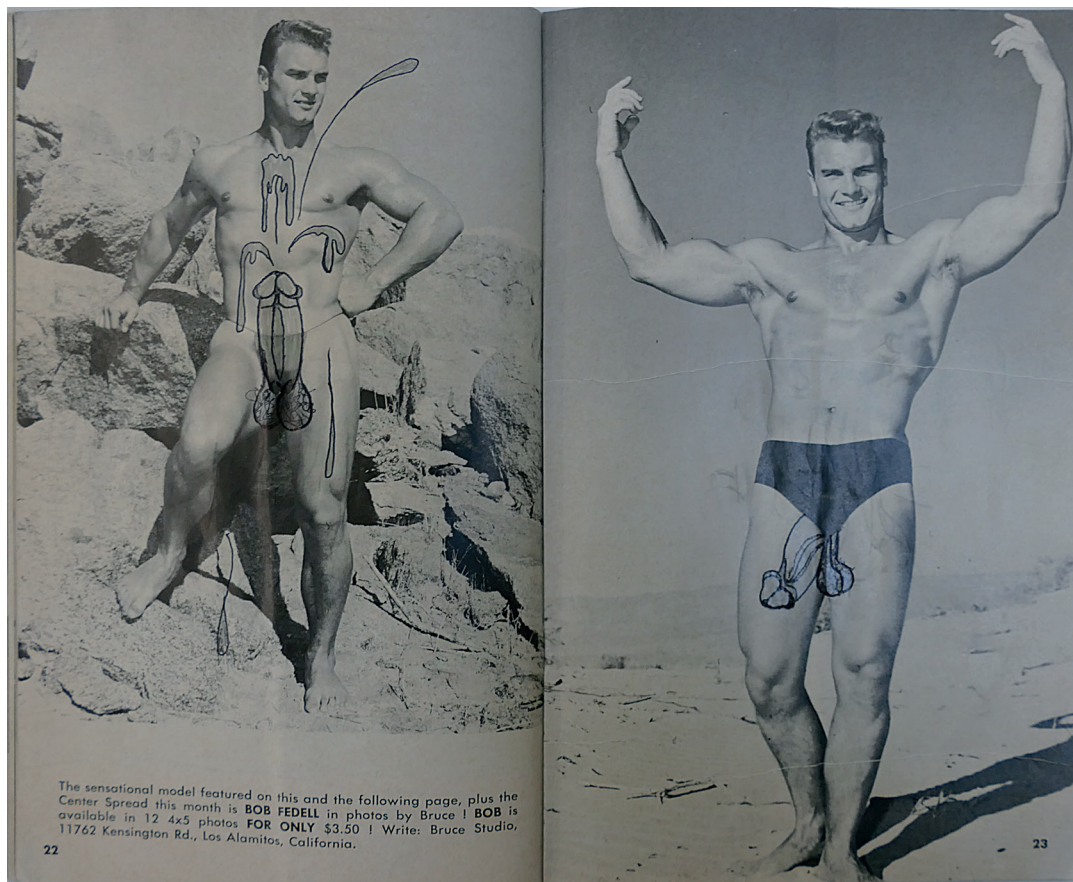
7 Page from a scrapbook, no date, creator no longer known. San Francisco, GLBT Historical Society, coll. no. 1992-15

two solo shots on the top and two duos on the bottom. All of these photocopies seem to have been retouched prior to printing, likely by the customer, so that forms of simplified, almost unrealistic penises, pubic hair, and testicles could be added manually where the posing strap had been. The negative was probably dodged to whiten the print, or the customer manipulated an original photo or its reproduction in a magazine with paint and then rephotographed or photocopied the images, which would explain their poor quality. The drawings appear amateurish for multiple reasons: they are drawn with a combination of pencil and ballpoint; the penises are unrealistically straight as poles, and all are about the same length and girth, circumcised, and pointed. They are inaccurately foreshortened, especially the one in the top right image, while the lower right figure is missing his testicles. They are so formally schematic and similar that one suspects the owner either had never seen an erect penis other than his own, that he needed to rely on a drawing in an anatomy book, or that he was simply not good at drawing. Other than that, the album is proof that physique photographers succeeded at their iterative allusions to the crotch. Furthermore, the photographs on the lower half prove that physique photography also succeeded at alluding to sex since the figures are positioned in poses that, especially with their drawn-in, erect penises, suggest imminent sex.

Another now unknown customer who bought the December 1964 issue of *MANUAL* took the title seriously and manually drew penises, testicles, and sperm directly on the pages of the magazine, which is now part of the add-on collection at the ONE Archives at the University of Southern California (fig. 8). The model, Bob Fedell, was photographed in a desert landscape by Bruce Bellas (Bruce of Los Angeles). On the left page, Fedell stands on a rock formation and rests his right hand on one of the stones with his left fist on his hip. The photo on the right page shows Fedell smiling at the camera, with his arms

raised in a heroic pose. On the left, the customer drew an oversized, almost comic-like circumcised and erect penis and equally huge hairy testicles on top of the model's posing strap, which indeed shows the tip of Fedell's penis, possibly incentivizing the customer to draw. The moment of ejaculation is shown in a fantastical manner that even a long-exposure photograph could not have captured: semen shoots up past the model's face and rains down like a fountain. In contrast, the drawing on the right shows a flaccid yet oversized penis and testicles hanging or falling out of the model's black briefs. Artistically and aesthetically, it seems a sensitive decision to draw the full crotch over the brighter posing strap on the left and to use the image showing black underwear to explore the motif of penises and testicles slipping, which would have been artistically more difficult vice versa.

Whether men made these changes for their own intellectual or sexual fun, out of creativity, or to share with others remains speculation. Ultimately, the physique genre's aesthetics and its iterative, seemingly endless sexual teasing left readers stimulated but also unsatisfied. The drawings prove that the absences of the penis, pubic hair, testicles, body fluids such as semen, and sex between men were present in the minds of contemporaneous queer beholders. "Sex can't be reduced to an organ, but when the body appears to radiate out from this central point, the bulging pouch becomes the focus of attention, energy, and excitement. The photographs' hidden agenda could not have been more obvious—or more tantalizing," as Vince Aletti notes regarding physique photographs' emphasis on the crotch.²⁶ Given the add-ons' partly humorously exaggerated, partly naturalistic or anatomical aesthetics, they likely provoked mixed feelings for their creators: physique photographs prompt despair, desire, humor, and hope in their presence and radicality that is amplified in private—and in their conformism that is countered at home.²⁷



8 Spread with drawings in *Manual*, no. 59, December 1964, 22–23, creator's name no longer known. Los Angeles, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries, Graphic Albums Collection, coll. no. 2008-046, box 9

Multiple art historians have theorized the act of beholding images as triggering imagination. Wolfgang Kemp offers a useful perspective in his theory of the aesthetics of reception under the term 'implicit beholder.' Kemp conceptualizes the aesthetics of "indeterminacy" in art as one form of addressing the beholder: "This state of unfinishedness or indeterminacy is constructed and intentional. Nevertheless, it does mean that as spectators we must complete the invisible reverse side of each represented figure, or that we mentally continue a path that is cut off by the frame. In this way, everyday perception is no different from aesthetic perception. The work of

art lays a claim to coherence, though, and this impulse turns its 'blanks' into important links or causes for constituting meaning."²⁸ He concludes that "works of art are unfinished in themselves in order to be finished by the beholder."²⁹ I would argue that all images, not just art, require a beholder to complete them to achieve meaning. Moreover, images filled with ambiguity and indeterminacy require the beholder's interaction and imagination to create "potential images."³⁰ Private add-ons show exactly these potential images materialized and document acts of queer perception that made sense of the ambiguity in physique photography. What differentiates queer

perception from Kemp's perspective, though, is that queer subjects did not decide to keep nudity and sex an artful indeterminacy to be completed by the beholder, but the authority of the state, law, and society predetermined it.

Being Away – Not Gone Forever

Across all of the above examples, the momentum between present and absent correlates with Ulrike Lehmann's definition of the aesthetic of absence: "The absent requires the present. An aesthetic of absence circumscribes therefore something present, which brings into view an absent, destroyed, or invisible image—in whatever form."³¹ Similarly, Drew Leder offers a short yet enticing etymological definition: "The word absence comes from the Latin *esse*, or 'being,' and *ab*, meaning 'away.' [...] Yet this absence is not equivalent to a simple void, a mere lack of being. The notion of being is after all present in the very word *absence*."³² Following Lehmann and Leder, I conclude that the absence of the essentials in mid-twentieth-century queer visual culture, most importantly of the penis, resulted not only in iterative allusions but also in the private collecting of physique magazines and photographs and associated artistic practices that reflect and point to this absence through the presence of additions as well as of collaged images in scrapbooks.³³ Added drawings and suggestive configurations, which materialize and counter this sexual teasing over decades, are a logical consequence of the physique genre's own visual strategies against censorship. What was outlawed emerged boldly in scrapbooks and on the hand-altered pages of magazines—except depictions of the anus. Contemporaneous imagery did not provide any blueprint for anal representations—in contrast to the phallic masculinity represented in bodybuilding, physical culture magazines, Hollywood film, or wrestling on TV. A lack of templates, the easy perception of phallic symbolism, the anatomically rather hidden posi-

tion of the anus, as well as the stereotype of the effeminate queer man might have created this absence of the anus that was only filled in a few illicit photographs and later more broadly in explicit pornography.

As discussed, there are multiple mandatory absences in physique imagery: penises, testicles, pubic hair, anuses, body fluids, intimacy, erections, and sex among men. The queer aesthetic and perception of absence in queer materials counter anti-queer absences, including those archival voids mentioned in the beginning. Historical queer approaches to necessary absences prove that queerness can even be found in seemingly normative materials, and that queer subjects connected via imagery and a shared visually strategic repertoire. While the latter demonstrate agency, humor, and a defiance of censorship, their aesthetic nonetheless carries forms of censorship within it, which creates ambivalence. Not only did queer imagery imply the forbidden, but it defied and gained power over censorship by working through its logic: Stressing forced absences, in the end and over the course of countless police raids, arrests, and prison sentences for queer men linked to this imagery, led to legal, social, and sexual liberties.

Milo's photograph of George Walker with which I began this article is both extraordinary and emblematic in its explicitness: Milo and other photographers who photographed nudes close the circle by representing the presence of full nudity, arousal, and sex in mid-century imagery in spite of it all. As I have shown, illicit images are not diametrically opposed to the imposed inhibition in published materials but constitute one end of the spectrum of visibility, of this only seemingly paradoxical play with absences in mid-century queer imagery.

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I thank the editors for their trust, help, and thorough editing; the whole group for their comments that shaped this article during the workshop at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in March 2023; Eva Ehninger's colloquium for everyone's recommendations; Chiara Harrison Lambe for her editing; and Luigi Valenti for his support and for understanding the value of absences. Research for this project was made possible by the Terra Foundation for American Art (Terra Immersion Semester 2019; Research Travel Grant 2021).

- 1 A short biography of Milo by Hugh McCurley can be found in Volker Janssen (ed.), *American Photography of the Male Nude 1940–1970*, vol. 5, Pat Milo, Simon's Town and Berlin 1998, n. p.
- 2 Cf. Pat Milo physique photographs, coll. no. 2014.123, box 14, at ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, Los Angeles.
- 3 Dian Hanson (ed.), *AMG: Bob Mizer's Athletic Model Guild. 1000 Model Directory*, vol. 2, Cologne 2016, 164.
- 4 Cf., e.g. Tom Pollard, *Sex and Violence: The Hollywood Censorship Wars*, Boulder 2009; Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed., New York and London 1998; Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship & Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*, Oxford 2002; David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, Chicago 2023.
- 5 Among the few scholars who focus on queer vernacular photography and queer visual culture is Thomas Waugh (*Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall*, New York 1996). Others have studied queerness in heteronormative culture, e.g., in the history of modeling (Elspeth Brown, *Work! A Queer History of Modeling*, Durham and London 2019), while I intend to focus on visual culture on the margins. Studies of queer visual culture aside from art are usually from the fields of theater studies, film studies, history, or performance studies that work outside the methodological frameworks of art history and visual studies and tend to underestimate the role of images, e.g., Kenneth Krauss, *Male Beauty: Postwar Masculinity in Theater, Film, and Physique Magazines*, Albany 2014; David K. Johnson, *Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement*, New York 2019.

- 6 Cf. Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, Berkeley 2005. This problematic exclusion of muscular bodies from queer studies was discussed in-depth at the conference *Hard Bodies: Aesthetic, Materiality, and Mediality of Masculinity in American and European Art and Visual Culture, c. 1900–today* at Goethe University, Frankfurt (9–11 January 2025), co-conceptualized and -organized by the author, Antje Krause-Wahl, Clara J. Lauffer, and Simon Wendt.
- 7 While some scholars advocate for pre-Stonewall culture to be described as 'gay' rather than 'queer' (cf. Johnson 2019 [as in note 5]), I use the term 'queer' due to its rebellious connotations that queer culture before Stonewall embodies and provokes.
- 8 Cf. John D. Wrathall, Provenance as Text: Reading the Silences around Sexuality in Manuscript Collections, in: *Journal of American History* 79, 1992, no. 1, 165–178; Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham and London 2003; *Cruising the Archive: Queer Art and Culture in Los Angeles, 1945–1980* (exh. cat. Los Angeles, ONE Archives), ed. by David Frantz and Mia Locks, Los Angeles 2011; Daniel Marshall, Kevin P. Murphy, and Zeb Tortorici (eds.), *Queering Archives: Historical Unravelings* (Radical History Review 2014, no. 120), Durham 2014; Katrin Köppert, Queere Archive des Ephemereren: Raum, Gefühl, Unbestimmtheit, in: *suburban* 3, 2015, no. 2, 67–90.
- 9 Barry Reay, *Sex in the Archives: Writing American Sexual Histories*, Manchester 2019, 13.
- 10 While it is beyond the scope of this article, a discussion of the whiteness of this imagery and the exoticization of Latinx, Asian(-American), and Black models is central in my dissertation project *Twilight Aesthetics: Queer Visual Culture in the United States Between 1945 and 1969*, Humboldt University, Berlin, completion expected in 2025.
- 11 Jonathan Katz, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, in: id. and David C. Ward, with Jennifer Sichel (eds.), *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, Washington, D.C. 2010, 10–61, here 14.
- 12 Waugh 1996 (as in note 5), 208–209.
- 13 Cf., e.g., David L. Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent: Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding*, Urbana 1994; Neil Carter, *Medicine, Sport and the Body: A Historical Perspective*, London and New York

- 2012; Shanon Fitzpatrick, *True Story: How a Pulp Empire Remade Mass Media*, Cambridge, MA 2022.
- 14 Waugh 1996 (as in note 5), 189.
 - 15 Horst Bredekamp, Substitutive Image Acts: The Exchange of Body and Image, in: id., *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, trans., ed., and adapted by Elizabeth Clegg, Boston and Berlin 2018, 137–192, here 175.
 - 16 Peter Weibel, Ära der Absenz, in: Ulrike Lehmann and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Ästhetik der Absenz: Bilder zwischen Anwesenheit und Abwesenheit*, Munich and Berlin 1994, 10–26, here 25 (trans. by the author).
 - 17 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York 2009, 65.
 - 18 Krauss 2014 (as in note 5), 213–219; Wayne E. Stanley, Introduction, in: *The Complete Reprint of Physique Pictorial, 1951–1964*, vol. 1, Cologne 1997, 6–17, here 11.
 - 19 For example, Bob Mizer's Athletic Model Guild stamped the backs of photographs with the following: "This picture sold for reference use of [Name] an artist who has guaranteed it will not be publicly displayed, copied, or reproduced without written permission. Ownership not transferable. Guild reserves right to bring court action if this contract be broken." Albert Hoxie Collection, ONE Archives at the USC Libraries, Los Angeles.
 - 20 Waugh 1996 (as in note 5), 247–248.
 - 21 The use of fig leaves was not common in antiquity, but, based on the Bible's story of Adam and Eve covering their nudity with fig leaves (Genesis 3:7), became a standardized artistic method to cover what was considered indecent and shameful following the rise of Christianity. Early bodybuilders such as Eugen Sandow posed in the nude with a (sometimes ridiculously oversized) fig leaf or pseudo-antique leopard print underwear, which influenced physique photography and its use of different kinds of fig leaves. Cf. B. J. Falk (photographer), *Eugen Sandow*, full-length nude portrait, ca. 1894, photograph. URL: <https://www.loc.gov/item/90715315/> (last accessed 12 February 2025).
 - 22 Max Böhner, Staging Props and Men in Mid-Century Queer Visual Culture, in: Joanna Olchawa and Julia Saviello (eds.), *Requisiten: Die Inszenierung von Objekten auf der Bühne der Kunst*, Heidelberg and Merzhausen 2023, 163–182.
 - 23 On the effects of shine, see Antje Krause-Wahl, Petra Löffler, and Anne Söll (eds.), *Materials, Practices and Politics of Shine in Modern Art and Popular Culture*, London and New York 2021.
 - 24 On Hollywood's creation of a form of (neo-)antiquity, see Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *Designs on the Past: How Hollywood Created the Ancient World*, Edinburgh 2018; Aaron Rich, The Accent of Truth: The Hollywood Research Bible and the Republic of Images, in: *Representations* 145, 2019, no. 1, 152–173.
 - 25 Cf. Böhner 2023 (as in note 22).
 - 26 Vince Aletti, *Bruce of Los Angeles: Outside/Inside*, New York 2008, n.p.
 - 27 For the affective potential of photography, see Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (eds.), *Feeling Photography*, Durham and London 2014; William J. Simmons, *Love and Degradation: Excessive Desires in Queer-Feminist Art*, University Park, PA 2025.
 - 28 Wolfgang Kemp, The Work of Art and Its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception, in: Mark A. Cheetham (ed.), *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, Cambridge 1998, 180–196, here 188.
 - 29 Ibid. See also Wolfgang Kemp (ed.), *Der Betrachter ist im Bild: Kunstwissenschaft und Rezeptionsästhetik*, Berlin 1992.
 - 30 Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, London 2002, esp. 13–20 ("Ambiguity and Indeterminacy").
 - 31 Ulrike Lehmann, Ästhetik der Absenz: Ihre Rituale des Verbergens und der Verweigerung. Eine kunsthistorische Betrachtung, in: Lehmann and Weibel 1994 (as in note 16), 42–74, here 58 (trans. by the author).
 - 32 Drew Leder, *The Absent Body*, Chicago and London 1990, 22. Cf. Weibel 1994 (as in note 16), 13.
 - 33 This is also true for artworks. A case in point is Jess, *The Mouse's Tale*, collage, 1951/1954, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, URL: <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/76.102> (last accessed 13 February 2025).

Photo Credits: 1, 3 Tim Wilbur Coll., Orange, Vermont, URL: <http://timinvermont.com> (last accessed 13 February 2025; no longer functional). — 2, 7 author (by kind permission of the GLBT Historical Society). — 4–6, 8 author (by kind permission of ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries).