

Wild Boys: Primitivism and Male Youth in Larry Clark's Photography and Films

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ABSTRACT

Wild Boys: Primitivism and Male Youth in Larry Clark's Photography and Films

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This thesis examines representations of young males in the photographs and films of the American artist and film-maker, Larry Clark (b. 1943). Known for his graphic and eroticising depictions of mostly delinquent young males often participating in acts of drug use, sex, or violence, Clark's vision of male youth shares many parallels with primitivism. The author argues that primitivism can be articulated not only in Western perspectives of the ethnic "other," but also in its representations of youth in contemporary art, cinema, and visual culture. The thesis identifies some of the major semantic and ideological tropes to which primitivism subscribes, with an emphasis on its nineteenth- and twentieth-century articulations, particularly within the fields of ethnography and Modernist *avant-garde* art. Through the examination of his representations of subculture, gender, and sexuality in such seminal works as *Tulsa* (c. 1971) and *Kids* (1995), we discover how Clark equates male youth with expressions of authenticity and anti-establishment transgression. Moreover, Clark's focus on marginal and delinquent youth groups helps him strategically situate himself as an artist outsider, a coveted position in western art history. Finally, the thesis explores how Clark's style and subject matter has been appropriated and absorbed into the fields of art, film, fashion, and advertising. It concludes that Clark's *oeuvre* has ultimately contributed to the construction and consolidation of a primitivising iconography and aesthetics of marginal and/or debauched male youth.

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Introduction

Endless Love: Visions of Youth and Larry Clark's *Oeuvre*

"Youth" is the location of social concern and social desire, fear and pleasure. – Charles R. Acland¹

The published screenplay for *Kids* (1995)² written by Harmony Korine (b. 1973) and directed by the notorious American photographer turned filmmaker, Larry Clark (b. 1943), finishes with a brief series of photographs of the film's untrained cast of teenagers in various locations: skateboarding in New York City's Washington Park, seated on brownstone steps, hanging out in shabby interiors. The book's final photograph however features the director himself, standing side-by-side with one of the film's principal actors (accompanied by the book's only caption: "Larry Clark and Justin Pierce") (figure 1). Despite the age gap between the two, their appearance, both physically and sartorially, is remarkably similar. Both are shirtless, revealing muscular torsos and veined arms, and wear loosely fitting pants belted low, bunched over boxers, according to the ubiquitous baggy-trousered dress code of skaters in the mid-90s.³ They also appear to share a certain attitude or demeanour; they look away from the camera, suggesting a refusal to pose or smile. The divergence between them is inescapably found in their faciality:⁴

¹ Charles R. Acland, *Youth, Murder, Spectacle: The Cultural Politics of "Youth in Crisis"* (Boulder/San Francisco/Oxford: Westview Press, 1995), 10.

² Harmony Korine, *Kids* [screenplay] (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

³ In fact, they were copying the sagging style first worn by many urban African-American male youth in the 1990s. Popularised by gangsta rap musicians, it has been suggested that the practice of wearing pants in this way originated in prisons where belts are forbidden given that inmates could use them to commit suicide. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sagging_%28fashion%29 (accessed on June 8, 2008).

⁴ The traditional definition of faciality is tripartite, summarised by Gilles Deleuze as follows: "Ordinarily, three roles of the face are recognisable: it is individuating (it distinguishes or characterizes each person); it is socialising (it manifests a social role); it is relational or communicating (it ensures not only communication between two people, but also in a single person, the internal agreement between his

Clark's craggy features, moustache, and messy grey ponytail contrast with Pierce's gelled shock of dark hair and smooth-skinned countenance still showing the last traces of baby fat. This photograph powerfully brings to light Clark's attempt to erase existing boundaries between his companion's youthful identity and his own. Like a vacation snapshot or postcard, it serves an "I-was-there" purpose for Clark; like a badge of honour, it confirms his affiliation with youth. As archival document, it strategically colours the viewer's perception of *Kids* and Clark himself, functioning as visual proof of his level of personal commitment to and engagement with his subjects of study (even suggesting a kind of *père-et-fils* lineage between Clark and Pierce), though also inevitably raising questions as to the appropriateness of his role-play.

Clark's work is often contentious given its up-close, naturalistic depictions of mostly 'bad boys'—slackers, hustlers, bullies, rapists, killers—often portrayed in acts of violence, drug use, and sex. Whether working in the realm of photography (*Tulsa*, c.1971; *Teenage Lust*, 1983) or fiction films (*Kids*, 1995; *Bully*, 2001; *Ken Park*, 2002; *Wassup Rockers*, 2005), his representations of male youth captivate and disturb not only because of the graphic treatment of the subject matter, but the strong overtones of voyeurism that they allow both Clark and his viewers. This ambivalence is further found in the way that Clark appears both to idealise *and* stigmatise his young subjects; to articulate adolescent subjectivity *while* objectifying their youthful bodies; to romanticise their transgressions *but also* exploit anxieties regarding teen delinquency; to render vividly detailed portrayals of subcultures *even as* he mythologises the wild adolescent male as a universal paradigm. In my thesis, I argue that that the category of primitivism

character and his role)." (Deleuze quoted in Richard Rushton, "What Can a Face Do? On Deleuze and Faces," *Cultural Critique* 51 (Spring 2002): 221).

can be extended beyond its usual boundaries to the category of youth and that essentially, youth has become another brand of primitive, especially within visual arts and culture.⁵ With his consistent focus on youth throughout a career spanning over three decades, Clark's *oeuvre* offers up a particularly potent example both as precursor to and participant in this ever expanding trend of youth-based primitivism.

As noted above, Clark is hardly alone in his interest in adolescence and youth culture or his particular emphasis, within this larger domain, on males and male-associated activities. Youth is an important source of inspiration for many contemporary artists⁶ in terms of subject matter, aesthetic, and approach. Contemporary visual culture—from fashion to film (figure 2)—appears equally fascinated, using youth as topic, touchstone, and target. The recent exhibitions, *The Fourth Sex: Adolescent Extremes* (2003),⁷ *Will Boys Be Boys?: Questioning Adolescent Masculinity in Contemporary Art* (2004),⁸ *Teenage Rebel (The Bedroom Show)* (2002-2003),⁹ *Boys Behaving Badly* (2004),¹⁰ and *The Youth of Today* (2006),¹¹ are only a few examples of contemporary art's fascination with this topic. Such exhibitions as *Black Male: Representations of*

⁵ By doing so, I do not wish to trivialise primitivism's negative legacy *vis-à-vis* the so-called ethnic 'other' or suggest that this phenomenon no longer continues to pervade contemporary western societies. Some current articulations of primitivism will be discussed in Chapter 1.

⁶ See Gean Moreno, "High Noon in Desire Country: The Lingering Presence of Extended Adolescence in Contemporary Art," *Art Papers Magazine* vol. 24, no. 3 (May-June 2000) 30-35.

⁷ See Francesco Bonami and Raf Simons, eds., *The Fourth Sex: Adolescent Extremes* [exhibition catalogue] (Milan: Edizione Charta, 2003).

⁸ See Shamim M. Momin, *Will Boys Be Boys? : Questioning Adolescent Masculinity in Contemporary Art* [exhibition catalogue] (NY: Independent Curators International 2004).

⁹ Featuring more than 70 mostly unknown (at the time) artists, this exhibition was curated by Scott Hug, as a spin-off project from his zine, *K48*, and presented in John Connelly Presents Gallery in NYC from December 4, 2002 to February 15, 2003. The curator transformed the gallery into a teenager's bedroom in which the artists' works were installed. See Peter Eleey, "K483: Teenage Rebel – The Bedroom Show," *Frieze* issue 74 (April 2003) http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/k483_teenage_rebel_the_bedroom_show/ (accessed on March 29, 2008).

¹⁰ See Valerie Cassel Olivier, *Perspectives 142: Boys Behaving Badly* [exhibition catalogue], (Houston, TX: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2004).

¹¹ See Matthias Ulrich, *The Youth of Today* [exhibition catalogue], 2006 (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2007).

Masculinity in Contemporary Art (1994)¹² and *Mass Appeal: The Art Object and Hip Hop Culture* (2002)¹³ can also be situated within this trend, though their emphasis was not placed solely on youth.¹⁴

Elaborating on her objectives for the group exhibition, *Will Boys Be Boys?*, Shamim M. Momin writes,

Less about “adolescence” as a specific phase of human development, this exhibition focuses on the constructed notion of “boyness”—not limited to any group per se, but more a social determination of image (physical representation), action (gendered activity and ritual), and objects (boy-associated symbols such as cars, guns, etc.).¹⁵

I quote her at length as her curatorial position is useful in its de-emphasis of any kind of fixed *scientific* notion of adolescence (in itself *one* conception of adolescence among *many*). Rather, she examines how existing dominant paradigms are represented within material and visual culture, while unpacking essentialist notions revolving around masculine youth as social and gender constructs. Like Momin, I am less interested in exploring adolescence or youth as rational concepts. Using the terms interchangeably, I employ adolescence or youth as a kind of palimpsestual paradigm—one that is inscribed with co-existent notions borrowed from a wide range of epistemic systems, rich with analogous associations within the popular imagination, and serving as stimulant for many artists. As Charles Acland reminds us, “Youth is an empty signifier that becomes meaningful only in given circumstances, coming to designate certain attributes and

¹² See Thelma Golden, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art* [exhibition catalogue] (New York City: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994.)

¹³ See Franklin Sirmans, *Mass Appeal: The Art Object and Hip Hop Culture* [exhibition brochure] (Ottawa: Gallery 101, 2002). This travelling exhibition was a condensed version of Sirmans’ *One Planet Under a Groove: Contemporary Art and Hip Hop* (2001-2003).

¹⁴ While *Black Male* explored past and present constructions of male African-American identity in the visual arts, *Mass Appeal* and *One Planet under a Groove* celebrated hip hop and its impact on clothing styles, music, and art, particularly within the realm of youth culture on a global scale.

¹⁵ Momin [no page number].

qualities.”¹⁶ In this way, we shall see that the paradigm of youth displays significant similarities to that of primitivism.¹⁷

With the aim of shedding light on how Larry Clark contributes to and draws from this youth-based paradigm, I will give here a brief overview of contemporary artists working in this vein.¹⁸ I have divided these practices into four loosely defined, often overlapping tendencies, namely, *anthropology and archive of youth*; *collaboration with youth*; *youth as performance*; *youth as state of mind*. These groupings are by no means definitive or exhaustive, nor the only way to read these works. I offer them merely as guidelines, and as will be seen, the artists that I use as examples often span many of the categories concurrently. Clark’s practice contains elements of all four.

Anthropology and Archive of Youth

A great majority of artists take an anthropological approach to male youth-based subcultures and their activities. Often the mediums of photography or video are used as modes of documentation in this process of investigating the exotic youthful ‘other.’ Sport and its emphasis on physicality, competition, and gender divisions in conjunction with each activity’s specific sets of rules and rituals, offers rich fodder for artists interested in studying groups of youth. Collaborating artists Greg Fiering and Matt Luem,

¹⁶ Acland 20.

¹⁷ In this vein, it is interesting to note how the historian, Philippe Ariès, makes parallels between the rise of the concept of childhood with the roots of primitivism, arguing that, in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, childhood was essentially “discovered—like the native Americans and the wild children.” (Adriana S. Benzaquén, *Encounters with Wild Children: Temptation and Disappointment in the Study of Human Nature* (Montreal and Kingston, London and Ithica: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006), 265).

¹⁸ Given that I focus on an American artist and filmmaker, and due to constraints of time and length, I will concentrate mainly on North American artists for the purpose of my thesis. Moreover, I will reference primarily, though not exclusively, artists whose art practices are informed by an interest in male adolescence, as is the case with Larry Clark.

for instance, are known for their photographs of the phenomenon of suburban-league wrestling for teenage boys in Southern California, documenting the arenas themselves, apparently constructed from junk culled from garages, alongside the participants before, during, and after the wrestling matches, as well as their parents and fans. With close-ups on bleeding boys brandishing home-made weapons, Fiering and Luem call attention to the performative and highly carnivalesque aspect of this gory amateur sport described by the curator, Valerie Cassel Olivier, as “ritualistic journey,” “dark grotesque theatrics,” “do-it-yourself spectacles,” “reminiscent of a vaudeville show,” “fused with primitive tribalism,” and “spectacle of pain.”¹⁹ By revealing a world unfamiliar to most, Fiering and Luem play out the role of anthropologists, allowing viewers a privileged look into the uncivilised practices of this very specific subcultural group of American boys. Despite their decision to focus on a sport played out within a very specific marginal or non-mainstreamed context, Fiering and Luem nonetheless create imagery that seems to prove that youthful masculinity is universally filled with a capacity for aggression and violence.

The American artist, Collier Schorr (b. 1963), has also photographed wrestling, although within the more official halls of high school (figure 3). In discussing this series, Schorr spoke of the thrill of photographing at close proximity these athletes who, being so deeply involved in the game, become unaware of her.²⁰ These photographs highlight how sport is used to shape these young boys and men according to dominant moulds of male identity; in other words: what it means to be a real man both physically and

¹⁹ Cassel Olivier 9.

²⁰ In a *Flash Art* interview, Schorr says, “You know, when you're being photographed and you're busy doing something, you don't think about what you look like. And you don't think about what the person with the camera is thinking. You're just doing what you're doing. And that's why it's a great place for me to photograph. I'm sort of inside someone's very physical, very violent, very vulnerable world, and they don't really notice I'm there.” (*Flash Art* vol. 37, no. 234 (February 2003), 80-83, <http://www.papercoffin.com/writing/articles/schorr.html> (accessed on April 20, 2008)).

psychologically in mainstream, heteronormative America. At the same time, this critique is often dissimulated within the surface beauty of these teenagers, and this work could be read as merely encouraging a desirous gaze but once again on the idealised icon of the male athlete in mainstream North American culture.

Skateboarding has served as a key point of inspiration for many artists such as Ed Templeton (b. 1972) and Tobin Yelland (b. 1970) who have all photographed skateboarding scenes from an insider point of view, given their own involvement as teenagers. In these works, often artists exploit sport through an appreciation of young male bodies moving (in the case of skateboarding: *flying*) through space and its associations (freedom, agency). Such works often show a fascination with youth who, with little consideration of the consequences, willingly put their bodies to the test and potential risk in extreme physical situations that may be violent or dangerous.

Musical scenes and their fans have similarly served as ‘case studies’ for many artists. For example, the photographer, Ryan McGinley (b. 1977), has photographed dedicated fans at Morrissey concerts, while Slater Bradley (b. 1975) exploits footage of concert performances by Joy Division, Michael Jackson, and Kurt Cobain. For *Peach Pit, A Fanbase* (2007), the rock star musician-cum-artist, Peaches (b. 1966), constructed a cave from hundreds of clothing items (mostly underwear) thrown on stage by her fans, that visitors could enter and then watch concert footage on a television monitor. This makeshift, highly tactile archive highlights the almost ritualised practice by fans at rock concerts—behaviour that outside the music venue would be highly unacceptable. Since the late 1990s, Steven Shearer (b. 1968) has been generating drawings, paintings, prints, and collages that collectively depict what one critic describes as “a world inhabited by

death-metal rockers, 1970s prefab boy bands and teen stars, glam-rockers and guitar-wielding teenaged suburban dreamers.”²¹ He is perhaps best known for his monumental heavy metal collages made from j-peg images culled from the websites of amateur musicians. In his archiving of massive quantities of images, Shearer maps and pays tribute to the lowly musical genre of heavy metal as an important part of white working-class cultural history.

In other art practices inspired by the study of musical scenes, we see an equally strong investment on the part of the artist, especially in terms of an extensive knowledge and appreciation of their associated styles, idols, and commodities in ways that are often ironic, nostalgic, or earnest. Kehinde Wiley’s (b. 1977) Rococo-style portrait paintings of music personalities, for instance, pay homage to the material culture surrounding rap and hip hop music, while making comparisons between it and the opulence of European court society (figure 4). His highly detailed and decorated paintings make us hyperaware of the influence of these music stars on many young males on a global scale in regards to their choice of clothing and accessories.

Other artists have been more interested in documenting youth as a universal period of transformation. Most famously perhaps, Rineke Dijkstra’s (b. 1959) photographs capture gawky swim-suited youth vulnerably wet-limbed on the beach. These are more about capturing a universal essence of adolescence as, little matter where they are shot, their origins or their gender, her subjects look remarkably similar. She poses them against bleak backgrounds, often alone, highlighting what appears to be a highly existential phase in life. In another series, she photographs on a yearly basis the

²¹ Deborah Campbell, “Steven Shearer: Bastard Offspring of the Photoconceptualists,” *Canadian Art* vol. 22, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 95.

physical transformation of two young Israeli soldiers, one male and one female. As her subjects are shot against neutral white backgrounds, the viewer is given little information in regard to their geographical locations or socio-economic backgrounds, and is left only to track the subtle evolution of their faces and expressions.

Mike Paré's (b. 1969) video, *Teenage Geography* (2002), attempts to understand youth through the documentation of the traces they leave behind. It takes the viewer to the secret hangouts of teenagers, often found within deserted natural or more urban settings—in woods or by rivers, under bridges or in abandoned concrete-constructed sites. Paré gives us access into their lives not through encounters with the teens themselves but *via* the vestiges of their activities: make-shift fire pits, condoms, beer cans, graffiti and spray painted messages (“fuck you,” “maggot,” “smoke weed”), porn magazines, a skateboard. These covert hangouts suggest lives lived on the margins of public spaces but also a kind of secret fraternity where clandestine rituals take place and where adults are not allowed. Paré's work suggests a fascination with youth as a kind of mysterious pre-socialised group living on the margins of society.

Collaboration with Youth

Some artists prefer a more participatory approach working closely with young people as part and parcel of their art practices. The very presence of youth (their bodies and voices in particular) imbues these art pieces with a heightened quality of authenticity which is viewed as augmenting the value of the work. As the Canadian artist, Althea Thauberger (b. 1970), writes, “Their teenage energy became an important part of the

work.²² Thauberger aims to access an adolescent state of mind through her collaborations with young men and women on videos that are distinguished by the awkward and emotional expressivity of her young protagonists. For *Songstress* (2001-02), Thauberger put out a call for female singer/songwriters; she then made music videos of these amateur female musicians interpreting songs that they had written themselves. Set in various natural settings, each video was the result of a single take and the young women were responsible for their own clothing, hair and makeup. The accompanying DVD features the lyrics written in each songwriter's hand. This project pays homage to the agency of these young women while highlighting their earnest emotionality. The apparent sincerity of these young women singing their hearts out to the camera is only heightened by the Canadiana natural backdrops of lush greenery, lakes, and waterfalls. At the same time, the somewhat clichéd similarity of the young women's gestural repertoire as they sing is clearly a result of their being well-versed in music videos as a popular medium and its associated conventions. *Songstress* offers viewers the chance to witness their sense of style (hippy, Goth), and remember to what extent clothing and make-up often plays in the construction of female adolescent identity in North America. In another collectively-created work titled, *A Memory Lasts Forever* (2004), Thauberger, using improvisation workshop techniques, works with four young women to create a short film for which together they develop the script, songs, and costumes (figure 5). In another entitled, *Social Service Does Not Equal Art Project* (2006), she collaborates with eight young men who opt out of doing military service in Berlin by choosing to work with her on this

²² Althea Thauberger quoted in "Canada Artist Portraits," <http://www.galleriesWest.ca/Departments/ArtistPortraits/6-96549.html> (accessed March 30, 2008).

project; using learned improvisatory techniques, the group generated this performance and video work.

In Phil Collins' (b. 1970) best-known work, *They Shoot Horses Don't They* (2004), Collins auditioned nine Palestinian teenagers to dance for a day in an event that resembled the dance marathons of the 1930s (the title is borrowed from the novella by Horace McCoy, and film by Sidney Pollack depicting a dance marathon during the Depression era in the United States). While Palestine is usually only presented as a conflict zone in mainstream media, this two-channel video (with a duration of seven hours) aims to offer up a different vision, one that reveals the potential agency and autonomy of its youth, in this case, through dance. Collaborative projects like Thauberger's and Collins' are often perceived positively within the populist value system of social and community art practices. At the same time, these works are equally critiqued as they often skirt issues of exploitation and appropriation on the part of the artist, while raising questions *vis-à-vis* authorship and artistic control.

Youth as Performance

Other works are equally performative although in this case it is the artist's own body that is utilised. Here the artists develop and perform adolescent alter egos in ways that the work arguably borders on autobiography or autofiction. Anthony Goicolea (b. 1971) has made a career from his digitally modified photographs that feature multiple versions of the artist disguised as a teenager in such "archetypal" situations and settings as summer camp or high school (figure 6). He explores the construction of queer identity,

exploring the fears, insecurities, and emerging sexuality of teenage boys. His imagery also functions as a kind of extended homoerotic fantasy, a seductive world inhabited only by young males.

Nikki S. Lee (b. 1970) takes this theme of 'acting out' adolescence beyond Goicolea's cut-and-paste approach, by spending extended periods of time with diverse youth groups and then appropriating elements of their respective lifestyles, adopting various youth personas that range from "ghetto girl" to skateboarder to punk rocker (figure 7). Her photographic series feature Lee, endless chameleon, seamlessly fitting into various groups. Though she spends ample time studying the styles and lifestyles of subcultures in all their specificity, her work nonetheless suggests that for youth, no matter their socioeconomic and ethnocultural backgrounds, there is a universal need to find and consolidate a personal and collective sense of self. Moreover, by continually transforming herself through the scenes she frequents and the clothing and makeup she wears, Lee reappropriates the pleasurable teenage practice of continual reinvention of personal identity through the decoration of the body's surface. In this way, her work celebrates the changeability of youth, before it coheres into a possibly more fixed adult identity.

As a teenager, Sadie Benning (b. 1973) made highly pixilated black-and-white videos created on a Fisher Price camera that explored her emerging queer identity and the processes of coming-of-age. The poignancy of the deeply personal nature of these videos in conjunction with their DIY aesthetic and rough editing (often filmed by herself in her own room, using available or hand made props, costumes, music, and lettering) makes her work instantly compelling. If artists like Goicolea and Lee act out youth despite their

age (suggesting a yearning or nostalgia for this period of life), Benning's own teenage performativity was rooted in an actual adolescent subjectivity, lending a heightened aura of authenticity to her early works.

Youth as State of Mind

In other practices, we sense that artists are attempting to tap into a kind of adolescent state of mind in their art practices—to make work according to a kind of overarching aesthetic, sensibility, or episteme of the adolescent. Frequently found within this category are articulations of heightened sexuality, violence, emotionality, and rejection of authority, often in conjunction with a crudely unpolished or, conversely, highly romantic aesthetic. Many of these artists reference or pastiche popular activities and commodities from youth-based culture both past and present—music albums, comic books, television shows, video games—as a way of eschewing institutional norms with its traditional divisions between high and low art, while aligning themselves with the perceived authenticity of youth particularly in its rebellion against “the dishonesty of the domesticated adult experience.”²³

Many of Steven Shearer's crudely pasted-together collages or pen drawings of heavy metal musicians, for instance, suggest a desire to give credence to a raw, amateur style normally linked with teen expression, but also give a sense of the important role of music in the lives of many youth (figure 8). The popular collective, The Royal Art Lodge

²³ Quoted from Scott Hug's curatorial statement for his group exhibition, *Teenage Rebel – The Bedroom Show*, in Karen Rosenberg, “Outside and In: Teenage Wasteland? Not in These Shows,” *The Village Voice* January 15, 2003, http://www.villagevoice.com/art/0303_roseberg.41156.13.html (accessed March 29, 2008).

(founded in 1996), with their *faux naïve* style of drawing, referencing elements of pop culture and fantasy, also can be put in this category. Rita Ackerman (b. 1968) draws girls in a comic book style that encapsulates a supertypical idea of girlhood. Her paintings resemble the messily decorated covers of student notebooks or teenage diaries. Covered with doodles and scrawled text, they feature young girls hanging out in their underwear, dreaming of romance, boys, and sex, waiting by the phone, playing with makeup. Other artists like Mike Kelley (b. 1954) with his intentionally ugly aesthetic, often based on dirty jokes and vulgar references to sex and feces, suggests the mindset of an immature high school boy.²⁴ At the same time, in his irreverent ‘fuck-you’ approach to art-making, one arguably finds a rejection of *bourgeois* values and art institutional norms that are replaced by a call for authenticity.

Elizabeth Peyton’s (b. 1965) drawings and watercolours of iconic musicians now dead (Kurt Cobain, Sid Vicious), movie idols (Leonardo di Caprio), and other popular personalities (Prince Harry) clearly sourced from photographs found in the mainstream media, suggests the copy art of star-struck, crushed-out teens. Executed in a candy-coloured palette that skirts the saccharine, Peyton’s portraits appear to ignore the possibility of any flaws, whether physical or psychological, in her subjects. The divide between her romantic vision of her subjects and reality becomes especially clear in her monograph entitled, *Prince Eagle*, featuring photographs and drawings of a handsome young man to whom Peyton was drawn because of his facial resemblance to Napoleon. In the photographs, it is clear that her Prince Eagle is attractive but also infinitely more

²⁴ Mike Kelley is quoted as saying: “An adolescent is a dysfunctional adult, and art is a dysfunctional reality, as far as I am concerned.” (Quoted in Hal Foster, “The Return of the Real,” *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: MIT Press, 2001, 4th printing, 1996, 1st ed), 272.)

human, more of the *flesh* in the most literal sense, and not the ephemeral and fragile young man that Peyton's brushstrokes evoke. A similar vein of celebratory worship and Romanticism runs through Karen Kilimnik's (1955) figurative paintings featuring a repertoire of teen idols (di Caprio again), rich socialites (Paris Hilton), and fashion models (Kate Moss).²⁵

This romantic quality also runs through Paul P's (b. 1977) paintings and pastels though this time with homoerotic overtones. His delicate renderings of young men are culled from photographs from 1970s gay porn magazines in a pre-HIV, pre-steroids era. P's evocative work is marked by desire and longing, but his youth are hardly corporeal or *sexy*; despite their nudity, their slender, somewhat androgynous bodies and downward gazes make them appear more like the pensive, melancholy heroes of a Lamartine poem (figure 9). P's recent series features similar portraits exhibited with still lives of flowers, underlining thus the fragility and vulnerability of these young men. His works, like Peyton's, manifest a poignant sense of regret for the too quickly passing beauty of youth.

The painters, Tim Gardner (b. 1973) and Scott Waters (b. 1970), use vernacular photography as their source material to explore and celebrate mainstream male homosociality. Going beyond the photograph as straightforward document, they create paintings based on photographs, to get closer to the psychological perspectives of those

²⁵ Jacqueline Cooper has written that the work of Peyton and Kilimnik "prefers to reflect on the residue of radicalism traditionally seen as embodied in adolescence, but tragically consumed and rendered impotent by the entertainment industry." She argues that though these portraits appear merely shallow celebrations of celebrity, they are actually marked by a preoccupation with death: "their images are frozen at a moment when their celebrity offered hope that the denial of aging can somehow act as a talisman against the process." (Jacqueline Cooper, "Controlling the Uncontrollable: Heavy Emotion Invades Contemporary Painting" (*New Art Examiner* v. 27, no 1 (Sept. 1999): 32-5.

http://0-vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.mercury.concordia.ca/hww/results/results_single_fulltext.jhtml;hwwilsonid=LSA4RC2EBGKRZQA3DIMSFGOADUNGIIV0 (accessed on April 25, 2008).

pictured, and to tease out the underlying emotional or sexual tensions concealed behind the bland surface of the snapshots. Many of Gardner's intimate watercolours come from snapshots featuring his brother and his friends. The viewer is made witness to university-age young men in what appear to be scenes of endless spring break, fraternity celebrations, or stag parties. They are featured in banal poses: arms draped around each other, leering at the camera, drunkenly raising beers in bars, randomly posed in front of cars in front of motel signs, parking lots and tourist sites. Straddling the line between celebration and critique, these paintings draw attention to the normative conventions and codes of behaviour underlying a culture of mainstream white heterosexuality.

The experience of military life has allowed Scott Waters the opportunity to explore manifestations of masculinity and male relationships within all-male groups. Paintings made from personal snapshots are based on his time as soldier spent in the Canadian Armed Forces from 1989-1992, as well as a more recent period spent as civilian with young soldiers about to go to Afghanistan. Mixing figurative techniques of high realism and the colours of abstract expressionism, his paintings often reveal the moments when soldiers are not in combat, but rather in states of recreation or repose—drinking, playing with guns, hanging out in dorms. Waters' work critiques official army discourse (are these the highly skilled defenders of peace or merely young men?), but also ultimately succumbs to nostalgia for this period of intense male bonding and intimacy—one that appears both emotional and erotic—that life in the military afforded him.

Chronic Youth: The Adolescent as Primitive

Many of the aforementioned or similar adolescent-based art practices are featured in the exhibition and catalogue, *The Fourth Sex*.²⁶ Arguably the defining exhibition on this tendency, it takes a wide-ranging visual culture approach to the topic of adolescence, including not only examples within contemporary art, but also film, print media, advertising, fashion, literature, and music. The catalogue includes the art works of dozens of artists in conjunction with texts (excerpts from screenplays, interviews, novels, and other writings both fiction and non-fiction) by quantities of writers ranging from Vladimir Nabokov to Douglas Coupland. There are even song lyrics by Nirvana, Britney Spears, and Lou Reed, to name but a few. Without undermining the ambitious scope of this project, it is clear from the beginning that co-curator Francesco Bonami is enthralled by the *mythology* of adolescence and its many associations. His curatorial essay is rife with sweeping generalisations (“The tension among desire, vision and destruction is part of the inevitable, essential moment in every human life that goes by the name of “adolescence,”)²⁷ essentialising overstatements (“Adolescence contains the existential anguish of every human being,”)²⁸ quixotic assumptions (“art is ... in constant pursuit of a new, sacrilegious, anguished, optimistic, experimental, self-destructive language,”)²⁹ and ludicrous armchair theorising (“If we are willing to consider male, female and homosexual as three categories, three mentally differentiated sexes, then adolescence may be seen as the fourth of these mental states.”)³⁰ Whether or not we agree with

²⁶ This exhibition was produced by the Fondazione Pitti Immagine Discovery at Stazione Leopolda in Florence from January 9, 2003 to February 9, 2003.

²⁷ Francesco Bonami, “The Fourth Sex,” *The Fourth Sex: Adolescent Extremes*, eds. Francesco Bonami and Raf Simons (Milan: Edizione Charta, 2003), 11.

²⁸ Bonami 12.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid. 11.

Bonami's musings on adolescence, his vision offers us insight into how perceptions of adolescence or youth go far beyond an objective or materialist definition designating a particular age group. Instead it is a site of multiple projections that various disciplines have defined through the lens of the specific focuses of their respective fields;³¹ to name but a few: *hormones* (biology), *criminality* (sociology), *sexual drives* (psychoanalysis), and so forth. Adolescence has thus come to exist in the popular imagination as a kind of conglomeration of these various perspectives. Often considered synonymous with rebellion, violence, destruction, and irreverence, it is also seen as an in-between time of transformation, a *tabula rasa* state full of potential and possibility, an investment for the future, as exemplified by the ideas articulated in Bonami's curatorial statement.

In reading his characterisation of adolescence as "self-destructive," "violent," "painful," "tragic," and even "visionary" in its "folly and ideals,"³² it becomes clear that Bonami's vision of adolescence shows parallels with everything from Romantic visions of youth to *art brut*'s idealisation of the marginal as authentic expression. In this way, parallels between his views of adolescence and primitivist perspectives and practices are grossly evident. Like the modernist *avant-garde* artists and intellectuals who embraced bohemian lifestyles and cultivated interests in so-called primitive art in rejection of dominant *bourgeois* values, Bonami links adolescence metaphorically with countercultural movements that have emerged in societies in states of stagnancy since the 1960s to the present,³³ which he identifies as an integral stage in the process of a

³¹ For summaries of key notions of youth, adolescence, and youth culture, see "The Wreckage of Body, Mind, and Morals: On Youth, Deviance, and Visibility," in Acland 23-38; Jon Savage's *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* (New York: Viking, 2007); Laurence Steinberg and Richard M. Lerner's "The Scientific Study of Adolescence: A Brief History," *Journey of Early Adolescence* vol. 24, no. 1 (February 2004): 45-54.

³² Bonami 11.

³³ Ibid.

country's growing-up.³⁴ Using a curious circular logic, Bonami argues that art can be equated with adolescence as “only art can represent the adolescent soul's extreme state of transformation, because art itself is an adolescent impulse.”³⁵ If in the field of late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century anthropology, ‘primitive’ societies were viewed nostalgically as representative of a ‘world on the wane,’ while equally considered a necessary phase before civilisation, so is Bonami's conception of adolescence, as can be seen in the following rather idealistic conclusion:

Adolescence, therefore, is not just an age group: it is a necessity for the fate of the world. Though painful and tragic, the crisis of adolescence is part of the evolutionary process of history. Without adolescence ... reality would slowly, inexorably move toward atrophy. Where there is no teenager there is no future.³⁶

Building on existent myths of adolescence, Bonami hyperbolically exploits youth as utopian metaphor for social revolution, global change, and artistic innovation; his essay can be seen as discursive evidence *par excellence* of the misguided excesses of youth-based primitivism. Similarly in Larry Clark's work and surrounding discourse, youth serves the primitivist function of signifying the desired values of transgression and authenticity. In my thesis, using Clark as example, I wish to show that many Western artistic and cultural practitioners, to greater or lesser degrees, subscribe to a primitivism of youth, and in so doing, contribute to the upholding and continuation of this seductive mythology. In my first chapter, I give a cross-disciplinary overview of primitivism in which I pinpoint some of the major semantic and ideological tenets on which primitivist perspectives are founded, focussing on those elements that are of particular relevance to

³⁴ Bonami places, rather preposterously, such political revolutionaries as Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela in the category of adolescence because, “Like adolescents they were ignored, punished, marginalized, yet with their extreme actions and words, with the risks they took, they managed to push the world in which they lived toward a transformation and toward greater social maturity.” (Ibid.).

³⁵ Ibid. 12.

³⁶ Ibid. 11.

recent representations of youth. I show that primitivism's lineage is multifaceted and far-reaching, with influences sourced in everything from pastoral poetry to Freudian views on sexuality to ethnographic research practices to the popular myth of the artist as outsider. By providing this framework, I show that primitivism's impact is extensive, pervading all levels of culture both past and present. In so doing, I aim to expand the definition of primitivism beyond its usual perception as a bygone phenomenon associated with misguided perceptions of non-Western groups and cultural practices, while demonstrating that primitivism can equally be articulated in current representations of youth within contemporary art and visual culture.

In my second and third chapters, I focus on some of the ways in which primitivism and Clark's representations of male adolescence are intrinsically intertwined through the analysis of Clark's photographic and cinematic works, as well as his own discussion of his practice. In Chapter 2, I use concepts of subculture and anthropology as points of entry into Clark's representations of male youth. I contextualise these depictions of youth within *cinéma vérité* and documentary photography practices while making reference to Dick Hebdige's *Subculture* and Hal Foster's "The Artist as Ethnographer." I will explore how Clark's observer-participant approach to marginalised male-associated youth groups lends credibility to his art practice, especially given Western art's ongoing fascination with 'the artist as outsider' myth.

In my third and final chapter, I focus on Clark's highly eroticised representations of the masculine gender and male sexuality throughout his oeuvre, using Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* as key theoretical touchstones. I am particularly interested in how Clark's images of

masculinity may correspond to or diverge from primitivist perspectives, and question if they deconstruct or merely confirm hegemonic or essentialist notions of masculinity. I explore the influence of Clark's representations of male youth, in terms of style and subject matter, on contemporary art and visual culture. What begins as a strategy of renewal and rebellion in terms of his art practice ends by being ultimately appropriated by and absorbed into the fields of art, cinema, fashion, and advertising, contributing thus to a larger primitivism of the adolescent and the adolescent male.

Chapter 1

Tracking the Primitive: An Overview

Elements of primitivism and its surrounding problematics offer up many interesting parallels with Larry Clark's portrayals of male youth, providing a fascinating lens through which to study his body of work. In this chapter, I will firstly explore some of the key influences that inform the multifaceted primitivist paradigm. My overview of primitivism aims neither to be chronological nor comprehensive. Rather, my primary goal is to identify and contextualise some of the major semantic and ideological tropes to which primitivist beliefs and representations subscribe, with an emphasis on nineteenth and twentieth-century primitivism within Modernist *avant-garde* movements. I should mention here that my approach reflects the critical, deconstructive thrust underpinning recent writings by postcolonialist scholars on primitivism. Secondly, I will demonstrate that as a practice, primitivism can be articulated not only in the Western world's perspectives of the ethnic 'other,' but also its representations of youth. Within the framework of the primitivist perspectives to be outlined in this chapter, I am particularly interested in the interrelated importance of ethnography, sexuality, marginality, and the *avant-garde*, and their implications in terms of Larry Clark's representations of male youth.

Here, There, and Everywhere: Primitivism Forever?

In his preface to the second edition of *Primitivism in Modern Art*,³⁷ Robert Goldwater states, “The primitive impulse in modern art is deep and widespread, and contact with the “ethnological arts” only furnishes one of the occasions for its expression.”³⁸ Hal Foster further expands primitivism’s scope, locating the notion of the primitive, not only within the constraints of Modernist art (Picasso, Gauguin, and company), but as the fundamental “binary *ratio*”³⁹ on which the entirety of Western thought has been predicated since the Enlightenment. For her part, Marianna Torgovnick emphasises the fact that primitivism is not a relic confined to a bygone era but existent today, within the very “ambiance and aura” of Western society, and to be found “across a wide range of fields and levels of culture: anthropology, psychology, literature, and art—and also advertising, fashions, television series, and fads.”⁴⁰ In short: primitivism’s reach is extensive; its manifestations multiple; its impact persistent.

Opposites Attract: Primitivist Binaries

The aforementioned binary quality is indeed a recurring characteristic of primitivism, precisely in its assumption of, as Marianna Torgovnick confirms, “the West as norm and defin[ing] the rest as inferior, different, deviant, subordinate, and

³⁷ This book was long considered the authoritative source on primitivism at the time of its initial publication in 1938, and was republished in 1966 and 1986.

³⁸ Robert Goldwater, “Preface to the Revised Edition [1965],” *Primitivism in Modern Art*, enlarged edition. 1938 (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986). [no page number given]

³⁹ Hal Foster, “The “Primitive” Unconscious of Modern Art – 1985,” Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch, eds., *Primitivism and twentieth-century art: a documentary history* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003), 384.

⁴⁰ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 21.

subordinatable.”⁴¹ The history of Western imperialism—officially traced back to Christopher Columbus’ arrival in the ‘New World’ (presently known as the Bahamas) in 1492— is founded on this “self-serving” notion of the primitive, that is to say the idea that, “‘Savages’ needed to be civilized, and...a natural component of that civilizing was extending European markets.”⁴² Severely misinterpreted Darwinism (Charles Darwin’s influential *Origin of the Species* was published in 1859) in conjunction with other evolutionary theory emerging in the nineteenth century, would offer such world powers as Britain, France, and Germany convenient fodder for racist and imperialist justification of the violent colonisation of Africa (to name but one continent), brutal exploitation of its peoples, and rampant looting of its resources and riches, though framed within a potently propagandising discourse of duty, emancipation, and redemption.⁴³

It is important to emphasise that primitivism usually functions within the West’s *imagined* and *projected* perspective of the Other—one that is a mythic⁴⁴ but also *strategic* way to define the West’s self-representation. In accordance with Edward Said’s seminal writings on the deep-seated European tradition of Orientalism (essentially a subset of the larger tradition of primitivism), Torgovnick writes that, at all costs, “The West seems to need the primitive as a precondition and a supplement to its sense of self.”⁴⁵ The West’s own imagined identity thus thrives on an illusory inverse image of itself as embodied by the primitive. To better understand the *utility* of primitivist discourse, it is indeed helpful

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Elazor Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds. “Introduction,” *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 3.

⁴³ Ibid. 1.

⁴⁴ I use the term here with reference to Barthes’ definition of myth as “*depoliticized speech*” that has “the task of giving us an historical intention a natural justification.” (Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957) (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 142-43.) It is important to note that Barthes does not suggest that the myth is *apolitical* in terms of its implications, but that as a discourse it serves a *normalising* function; that is to say, myth appears to depict the natural state of affairs while concealing its underlying political agenda.

⁴⁵ Torgovnick 246.

to look at Said's description of the prescribed nature of Orientalism which he identifies as rooted in a

sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed ... by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections.⁴⁶

Moreover, Said convincingly argues that these preconceptions are effectively set in place to confirm and consolidate the West's collective sense of superiority and therefore justify its political and economic domination on a global scale: "Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand."⁴⁷

Primitivism's thrust is not always derogatory however, but paradoxically can have more positive connotations. In this way, its duality is found not only in terms of the *versus*-them dynamic that it embodies, but also the conflicting type of primitivism in question, be it "nightmare or pleasant dream."⁴⁸ Torgovnick summarises effectively this antithetical view of supposedly primitive peoples as, on one hand, perceived as "dangerous and unnatural, something to be feared" but, on the other, the "idealized noble savage, something to be emulated."⁴⁹ The myth of the noble savage is usually traced back to the Romantic era when a " 'primitivist' tradition evolved which associated what were perceived as simple lives and societies with ... more direct or purified

⁴⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978 (NY: Vintage Books, 1994), 8.

⁴⁷ Said 7.

⁴⁸ Torgovnick 246.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 159.

expression.”⁵⁰ Attributed to the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau,⁵¹ this influential myth describes the noble savage as exhibiting “‘natural’ human feelings of gentleness or generosity.”⁵² Gerald McMaster summarises the distinctly nostalgic characteristic of this very Christian notion, writing, “[t]he discourse of the noble savage was framed in stereotypes alluding to “children of Eden” who were innocent, virtuous, peace-loving, free of guilt and vanity.”⁵³ One cannot help but note the semantic associations of the noble savage as the embodiment of “nature uncorrupted”⁵⁴ with the child here, for if Rousseau is often misleadingly linked with the notion of the noble savage, he is also usually cited (correctly this time) for his role in generating positive interest in childhood, thanks to his book, *Émile ou de l'éducation* (1762). And in effect, his perspectives on children are very similar to that of the noble savage myth, precisely in his admiration for their perceived innocence and proximity to nature. This view of children resonates in Anne Higonnet’s description of eighteenth-century Romantic paintings of children:

the Romantic child shrinks away to an unattainable distance from the adult present. According to Romantic pictures of children, innocence must be an edenic state from which adults fall, never to return. ... The Romantic child is desirable precisely to the extent that it does not understand desire.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Gill Perry, “Primitivism and the Modern,” *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 6.

⁵¹ Rousseau continues to be credited with the influential notion of the savage as naturally noble in his essay, “A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality” (1754); however, Ter Ellingson argues that the philosopher’s ideas were severely misinterpreted and that Rousseau’s depiction of the noble savage was not such a positive vision after all. See Ter Ellingson, *The Book of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001). Likewise, Gill Perry admits that in its popular conception, Rousseau’s original vision is often “distorted.” (Perry 6). For the purpose of this thesis however, I am interested in the noble savage in terms of the idealised image it continues to occupy within the popular imagination.

⁵² Mark Antliff and Patrick Leighton, “Primitive,” *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 178.

⁵³ Gerald R. McMaster, “Desperately Seeking Identity in the Space of the Other,” *Edward Poitras: Canada XLVI Biennale di Venezia* (Hull, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1995), 27.

⁵⁴ Juliet Dusinberre, *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children’s Books and Radical Experiments in Art* (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1987), 7.

⁵⁵ Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 28.

It is interesting to note however that, much as in the case of the noble savage, the dark underside of Romantic childhood was never far off; as one writer reminds us, Rousseau's "contemporary the Marquis de Sade reserved many of his most savage and violent fantasies for them."⁵⁶ Moreover, only one century previous to Rousseau's (and this only serves to confirm to what extent his notion of childhood differed from the existing ideas of the time), John Calvin perceived children as "creatures of innate sin from birth, predestined to damnation unless they subordinate to God's will."⁵⁷

Within the Romantic movement, primitivism did not revolve solely around the idealised noble savage and innocent child. Influenced by pastoral poetry and painting traditions, Romantic primitivism equally looked to Europe's own rural and peasant cultures whose close relationship with the land (often based on making a concrete livelihood) was "exalted ... as evidence of some kind of innate creativity."⁵⁸ This "myth of the rural peasant as a figure of great moral merit and purity, uncorrupted by the sophistication of the modern world"⁵⁹ was prevalent right up to the nineteenth century, during which for instance, the practice of painting out-of-doors became popular, as was the case with the Barbizon School in France (in fact one of many similar institutions). It was not unusual then that Gauguin, before his travels to Tahiti, visited and worked in Brittany, writing glowingly of this region where he felt able to "find something savage, primitive."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Michael Slaven, "Jail Bait at the Millennium: Lolita's Grotesque Body," *New Art Examiner* 25.9 (1998): 16.

⁵⁷ Momin, *Will Boys Be Boys?: Questioning Adolescent Masculinity in Contemporary Art* (NY: Independent Curator's International 2004), no page number.

⁵⁸ Perry 6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 10.

⁶⁰ Gauguin writing in 1888, quoted in Perry 8.

The Ethnographic Eye

The development of the social sciences would equally play an essential role in shaping the focus of primitivism on the so-called savage. In reference to the ethnographic and anthropological practices emerging during the nineteenth and twentieth century, Julia E. Liss describes these new fields of study as manifesting “the alternation between alienation and attraction”⁶¹ as experienced by European anthropologists. In Liss’ view, “A destabilized sense of self—one formed out of experience of perpetual marginality—contributed to an anthropology that focussed on connections and relatedness.”⁶² She argues that as the European anthropologist observed the foreign society, the sense of being on the outside (yet longing to be part of it), had a significant impact on the very universalising agenda of anthropology, despite its overt emphasis on difference. We see this perspective in such early practitioners of the field as Franz Boas, who, in books like *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), emphasises how despite the differences, all cultures were essentially the same. It was, Liss argues,

[t]hrough claims to this universalism, Boas could ensure his place as an interpreter of the cosmopolitan directives. He could now, “as thinking person,” claim authority to scrutinize the particulars of existence, the customs that he could admire from a distance but of which he could never truly be a part.⁶³

In Boas’ writings, argues Liss, we see a constant back-and-forth between “his emphasis from the perspective of an insider—the position of total immersion—to that of the

⁶¹ Julia E. Liss, “Patterns of Strangeness: Franz Boa, Modernism, and the Origins of Anthropology,” in Elazor Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds. *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 128.

⁶² Liss 114.

⁶³ Ibid. 125.

outsider who is legitimated in his search for ‘truthful results.’”⁶⁴ Although most Modernist artists were not directly influenced by anthropology, we can see this oscillation between insider and outsider status within primitivist discourse. Moreover, similarly to the ethnologist, the Modernist artist believed he had a special capacity to tap into a foreign culture and interpret it through his art for his viewer. Sally Price pointedly argues however that underlying this supposed special interpretive ability of the ethnographer or the artist is the oft unspoken-of “accessibility of ... diverse cultures to those who enjoy membership in Western society.”⁶⁵

Anthropology and its Eurocentric interpretive gaze would play a major part in the emergence of ethnographic museums and the framing of the objects within. Objects that had been collected if not looted previously⁶⁶ on display in privately owned curiosity cabinets—collections of various exotica—were increasingly placed within newly founded state- or university-run museums such as the *Musée d’ethnographie du Trocadéro* (later known as the *Musée de l’Homme*), 1879), the Pitt-Rivers Museum, 1851; and the Peabody Museums, 1866. These objects were classified according to ethnographic categories and “commentary ... was being provided mainly by the new discipline of anthropology.”⁶⁷ The Iroquoian artist and art historian, Tom Hill, acerbically describes this shift from the collection and display of ‘curios’ to ‘artefacts’ here:

⁶⁴ Ibid. 129.

⁶⁵ Price 23.

⁶⁶ Berlo and Phillips describe in no uncertain terms “the vacuum sweep of Native American objects into public and private collections with a systematic thoroughness that routinized what amounted to the rape of entire cultural patrimonies.” (Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, “Our (Museum) World Turned Upside Down: Re-presenting Native American Arts,” *The Art Bulletin*, March 1995 vol. LXXVII no. 1, March 1995): 7.

⁶⁷ Wyatt MacGaffey, “Structural Impediments to Translation in Art,” *Translating Cultures: Perspectives on Translation and Anthropology*, eds. Paula G. Rubel and Abraham Rosman (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), 249.

What began as a hobby or a means to satisfy public curiosity, however, was given legitimacy through the rise, in the second half of the century ... [of] anthropology. Anthropology lent credibility to collecting and justified investment in museums.⁶⁸

In their discussion of historical museum practices *vis-à-vis* Native American art objects, Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips write, “During the century from about 1830 to 1930, an extraordinary quantity of objects became “toys of the white child,” to be rearranged according to the taxonomies of science.”⁶⁹ These new anthropological categories often did little more than to function as

demonstrations of the absence of civilization among those who produced them, illustrations for an evolutionary narrative. Meaning was assigned to African and Oceanic works ... in terms of the evolutionary assumptions they were called upon to illustrate.”⁷⁰

Methods of presentation such as the use of vitrines for display of the objects not only mimicked the supposed objectivity of the anthropologist’s gaze but “erased” or at least rendered invisible the history of colonialism inherent to museum collecting through the display of pieces, removed from their usual ethnocultural and socio-political settings, in new, supposedly neutral contexts. Moreover, many objects were presented as examples “of unchanging realities, incapable of meeting the advance of civilization and progress, trapped in the time-warp of exhibition dioramas.”⁷¹ These exhibition strategies⁷² appear rooted in a nostalgic desire to conserve the image of the primitive in a state untouched by

⁶⁸ Tom Hill, “A Backward Glimpse through the Museum Door,” *Creation’s Journey: Native Identity and Belief* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 15.

⁶⁹ Berlo and Phillips, 7.

⁷⁰ MacGaffey 250.

⁷¹ Hill 16.

⁷² More spectacular strategies of framing ethnic groups through a colonialist lens were large-scale world fairs such as the Universal Exhibition in Paris, and the Colonial Exposition and Crystal Palace Exhibition in London that emerged contemporaneously as popular, well-attended events. These expositions often including sections dedicated to colonised populations, functioning like a cross between historical parks and circuses (in 1900, for example, faux West African villages were built and featured prominently at the Universal exhibition in Paris with “real” Africans dressed up and put on display). See Nancy Perloff, “Gauguin’s French Baggage: Decadence and Colonialism in Tahiti,” Eds. Barkan and Bush, *Prehistories of the Future*, 226-269.

modernity and contact, in conjunction with the notion that it was necessary to salvage and preserve the cultural ‘artefacts’ of groups that would eventually die out. At the same time, many museums preferred to “subscribe to the ‘dying race’ theory and resort to the tropes of the noble and ignoble savage,”⁷³ and overlook the fact that governments were actively suppressing the cultural, spiritual, and linguistic expressions of these very groups through the repressive measures that make up processes of colonisation, assimilation, and conversion. The historical treatment of aboriginal groups across North America is a key example of this phenomenon. In her discussion of the ethnographic photographer, Edward S. Curtis, known for his early twentieth-century photographs of American Indians (figure 10), Ann Maxwell writes that he was

less interested in preserving Indians in the flesh than on celluloid. Just as the ethnographers attempted to preserve indigenous cultures by placing them in museums, Curtis hoped to save Indian culture from extinction by consigning it to the eternal world of art.”⁷⁴

With the idea of a vanishing race as the backbone of his monumental project, Curtis’ documentation and aestheticisation of various tribes, according to Maxwell, essentially “gave genocide an acceptable face.”⁷⁵

This notion of a prehistoric or a-historical time associated with supposedly primitive societies would be a predominant trope in the development of ethnographic and anthropological practices as well as primitivism at large. Sally Price terms this phenomenon the “ethnographic present” because it “abstracts cultural expression from the flow of historical time and hence collapses individuals and whole generations into a

⁷³ Ann Maxwell, “Shifting Focus: Photographic Representations of Native Americans and African Americans,” *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions* (London and NY: Leicester University Press, 1999), 123.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 113.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 110.

composite figure alleged to represent his fellows past and present.”⁷⁶ This idea of the ethnographic present could be articulated in a dualistic fashion: for some, non-industrial societies were admired for supposedly living in an unchanging, idyllic relationship with the earth, while for others, they could be belittled for their alleged existence in a pre-civilised, barbaric state. Interestingly enough, these camps were not always in clear opposition. In a lot of ethnographic writing by such seminal practitioners as Franz Boas and Claude Lévi-Strauss for instance, one finds a combination of these seemingly disparate points of view, wherein admiration and condescension meld.

Transgression through Sexuality

Eroticism has always been a highly charged feature of primitivism; as Sally Price argues, “the identification of unleashed sexuality as “primitive” permeates the “civilized” world.”⁷⁷ If so-called primitive societies were considered irrational, they were however supposedly “sexually more excitable (and more physical generally) than Europeans. Males were seen as sexually more aggressive and promiscuous. Africans in particular were seen as sexually rapacious and domineering.”⁷⁸ The idea of unrestrained sexuality has often signified within Western society as an anti-*bourgeois* positioning, a sign of rebellion and liberated bohemianism. Within a Christian frame of reference, it is seen as a way of getting back to the Garden of Eden before sexual shame and modesty existed:

At some gut level of the Western imagination, they [primitives] appear to be “free” from socially imposed rules. In the context of the evolutionary

⁷⁶ Price 57.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 45.

⁷⁸ Andrew P. Lyons and Harriet D. Lyons, *Irregular Connections: A History of Anthropology and Sexuality* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska, 2004), 7.

associations we have already touched on, their life “predates” the constraints under which we live; in a less time-oriented vision, it is simply “outside.”⁷⁹

In this way, the supposedly unbridled sexuality of non-industrialised peoples is first and foremost a Western fantasy which is perceived as the “vehicle par excellence for the expression of deviance from mainstream cultural norms.”⁸⁰

This envy of the Savage’s apparent access to his sexuality—those “‘primitive drives’ that represent the ‘dark side’ of human nature—aggression, sexual fantasy, polymorphous sexuality, and so forth”⁸¹—can be linked equally with the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, and his still influential notion of the unconscious, one that “presupposes that man is governed by an internal ‘other’ ... a labyrinthine, potentially conflicted inner self.”⁸² As is well-known, Freudian thought is integrally structured around the idea of human sexuality as *the* underlying influential factor of personal development. In *Totem and Taboo* (rather cavalierly subtitled in its first publication, *Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*) for instance, Freud posits that those who never succeed in breaking free of the incestuous impulses normally experienced during childhood remain in a state of “psychical infantilism,” in the forms of “developmental inhibition” or “regression,” and suffer from “incestuous fixations of libido [which will] continue to play ... the principal part in his mental life.”⁸³ Thus, even while the possibility for an uninhibited sexuality lies deep within our (childhood) selves, its restraint is essential not only on an individual level but also a collective one. Freud concludes the book by arguing that “Primitive

⁷⁹ Price 46.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 47.

⁸¹ Ibid. 48

⁸² David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 102.

⁸³ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (London, Melbourne, Henley: Ark Paperbacks, 1983), 17.

men ... are *uninhibited*: thought passes directly into action.”⁸⁴ In other words, civilisation is the desired result of “the suppression of those “primitive drives” and identifi[ed] ... with the gradual process of personal maturation.”⁸⁵

Marianna Torgovnick reminds us that Freud’s hyper-sexualised views on human development influenced many of the assumptions and approaches of early ethnographic / anthropological practices and that his “explanation of the human psyche in terms of sexuality undergirded their endeavours and influenced the structure of many ethnographic inquiries at this stage of the discipline’s development.”⁸⁶ One infamous case in point here is Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1927), and though there is no mention of these particular cases of “participant observation” in the book itself, it is known, thanks to his diaries, that he had sexual encounters with some of his subjects in the Trobriand Islands.

Appropriation, Authenticity, and the *Avant-garde*

To better understand the nature of the Modernist *avant-garde*’s engagement with primitivism, I will very briefly discuss here the concept of the *avant-garde* itself. In the words of Walter Benjamin, the *avant-garde* is characterised by the artists’ desire “to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.”⁸⁷ Refusing artistic stagnation and generally accepted social conventions, the work of the *avant-garde* “interrupt[s] the sense of continuous development in the arts by its transgressions against

⁸⁴ Freud 161

⁸⁵ Torgovnick 48.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 7.

⁸⁷ Benjamin quoted in Ann Gibson, “Avant-Garde,” *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 159.

anything established as a given.”⁸⁸ In her essay on the *avant-garde*, Ann Gibson efficiently summarises two influential perspectives as proposed by Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger. In his conception of the *avant-garde*, Poggioli emphasises the formal innovations of late nineteenth-century *avant-garde* artists interested in pushing the boundaries of art through the embracing of the “cult of the novelty and even of the strange”⁸⁹ in their art practices. Peter Bürger, for his part, calls attention not only to the rule-breaking aesthetic gestures of the *avant-garde* but also its socio-political aims and ramifications. In this way, Bürger understands the artist not as free agent but as functioning within “an institutional framework that ... determines what art is supposed to be and do. Thus for Bürger, the *avant-garde* cannot be separated from society, but is inescapably implicated in it.”⁹⁰ According to Gibson, Bürger attributes the importance of the early twentieth-century *avant-garde* to its revolt against “the deadening effects of art’s institutionalization.”⁹¹

Although primitivism evidently existed well before, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, we find a renewed primitivist movement, in which European artists such as Gauguin and Picasso became at least superficially interested in African and Oceanic objects, through stylistic or formal pastiche. Most Modernist artists often had very little knowledge or interest in the identity and intentions of their creators or the specific contexts for and in which the objects were produced. As one critic reminds us, “Picasso famously expressed his lack of interest in the meaning to Africans of their art by

⁸⁸ Gibson 159.

⁸⁹ Poggioli quoted in Gibson 159.

⁹⁰ Gibson 159.

⁹¹ Ibid.160.

saying that the objects themselves told him all he needed to know.”⁹² Nonetheless, Picasso is frequently presented in Western art history as having been responsible for the *discovery* of African art, a term steeped in the language of colonialist discourse as well as the Western notion of the artist as visionary interpreter. Susan Hiller points out that that this supposed “‘moment of discovery’, itself mythic, binds together the imperialist conditions of possibility with the appropriative strategies of modernism.”⁹³

In his introduction to *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, Jack Flam attempts to contextualize and explain the primitivist thrust of early twentieth-century modernism. He suggests that for many European artists of this era, African, and Oceanic art forms appeared excitingly different from the Asian, Indian, and Islamic art with which they were already more familiar for two main reasons. Firstly, Asian, Indian, and Islamic art came from cultures with written histories and therefore their works could be studied chronologically, and secondly, these same traditions were often figurative (and therefore resembling in this way European art traditions) and “depicted complex, narrative subjects that could be traced and analyzed.”⁹⁴ In contrast, so-called art from Africa

had no known historical development and seemed to exist in a kind of temporal vacuum. The idea that the origins of Primitive art, like those of prehistoric art ... allowed for a fair amount of romantic speculation and rumination about it.⁹⁵

Examples of African and Oceanic sculptures, designs and motifs—as well as the producers of these works—were seen as being rooted in simpler, more *authentic* cultures,

⁹² MacGaffey 250.

⁹³ Susan Hiller, “Editor’s Introduction,” *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*, ed. Susan Hiller (London and NY: Routledge 1991), 11.

⁹⁴ Jack Flam, “Introduction,” *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, eds. Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003), 4.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

as well as coming from a childlike, instinctive creativity. Sally Price writes in her seminal book, *Primitivism in Civilized Places*:

Just as children cry when they are hungry and coo when they are content, Primitive artists are imagined to express their feelings free from the intrusive overlay of learned behaviour and conscious constraints that mould the work of the Civilized artist.⁹⁶

At the same time Price underlines that, “This mirroring of African and Oceanic artists and art with childhood was far from innocent and disturbingly representative of the “undercurrent of pseudo-scientific theories about race and culture”⁹⁷ circulating during this period.

So-called primitive peoples were romantically viewed by many turn-of-the-century *avant-garde* artists in opposition to, or as escape from, what they considered the stultified state of European art and society at the end of the century. Moreover, the alleged “naïveté admired in “primitive” art belied ... concerns that their own fine arts tradition was sliding into decadence.”⁹⁸ Many European artists were especially critical of the high level of control held by the academic art system of the nineteenth century in regards to acceptable style, genres, and subject matter:

The naïveté of “primitive” expressions was frequently contrasted to the “subterfuges of language, the artifices of style, brilliant turns of the phrase” associated first with the rococo and subsequently with a bankrupt academic tradition. As the nineteenth century progressed, it became common to contrast the empty sophistication of European art to the rude truth to be found in “primitive” expressions.⁹⁹

During this period, we also see a rejection of the Cartesian values usually associated with the Royal Academy in Paris (whose power had been wielded since 1648, the year of its

⁹⁶ Price 32.

⁹⁷ Judith Zilzer quoted in Price 33.

⁹⁸ Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 21.

⁹⁹ Connelly 21-22.

founding) wherein, “Rationality formed the core of academic precepts, which held that the construction of an idealized image, in which both form and action were perfected, was the highest attainment of an artist.”¹⁰⁰ This rejection of “the academy and the classical ideal brought about a reevaluation of emotion as against reason, and therefore of the primitive.”¹⁰¹ What had previously been considered within the classical academic framework as *grotesque* (epitomised by the fetish considered since the Enlightenment as “the antithesis of civilization...the product of merely random impulses and violated the elementary Cartesian distinction between animate and inanimate beings”¹⁰²) suddenly took on a new value.¹⁰³ One notes however that though many of these artists were certainly interested in re-evaluating European interpretations of these non-Western aesthetics by looking at these works from a point of appreciation, many of their ideas remained nonetheless rooted in the predominant views of the time, views that despite their best intentions were coloured by a heritage of colonialist belief systems. In other words, many Modernist artists idealised (rather than denigrated) non-Western, pre-industrial societies *because* the latter were considered to be less advanced and civilized, and therefore closer to a baser physicality. Being more physical signified for the avant-garde artist that these societies were somehow closer to all things sexual, violent, and barbaric.¹⁰⁴ Using a reverse logic however, the cultural production—imagery, motifs, styles—of non-Western societies could be appropriated given what was considered their revitalising potential for *avant-garde* art. In so doing, not only could they

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 13.

¹⁰¹ MacGaffey 250.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ See Torgovnick 126-137 for her discussion on the Western propensity to project these three characteristics on to African art.

enic[h] their repertoire by drawing upon a range of ethnological, archaic, or ‘outsider’ styles, all which have been seen as raw, truthful, and profoundly simple, a set of projections which is the *precondition* for the validation of these exotic influences.¹⁰⁵

but also—within this circular, self-serving logic—strengthen their own art-making by pastiching from styles to which they ascribed “the very qualities they themselves sought to attain.”¹⁰⁶

Borderline Rejuvenation: Marginal Subject Matter, Marginal Artists

Primitivism in Western art has long been associated with the validation of the marginalised, or that is to say, an identification with the lower strata of European populations in terms of economic class and social standing, or ethnic groups whether at home or abroad. The socially, culturally, and ethnically marginalised were considered to have authenticity, vivacity, and colour—features that bourgeois society in contrast seemed to lack. With the objective of rejecting conservative *bourgeois* values then, many artists chose to align themselves with these marginalised groups, whether socially or artistically speaking (one can make parallels here with the contemporary notion of “slumming”). Antliff and Leighton summarise this phenomenon here:

Far from requiring a colonial other, modernists could as easily accommodate rural and urban peasants to primitivist categories of authenticity and outsiderhood, looking to folk art of the rural peasantry or popular art of the working class to lend greater authenticity to their own expression of artistic and social criticism.¹⁰⁷

This idealisation of marginality, whether internal or external to Western culture, would later become an essential feature of late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century primitivism

¹⁰⁵ Robert Goldwater quoted in Hiller, “Editor’s Introduction,” *The Myth of Primitivism*, 12.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Antliff and Leighton 182.

within the artistic milieu of important European cultural centres like Paris. While rural populations and related subject matter were being romanticised in such works as Jean-François Millet's *The Gleaners* (1857), those who struggled to make a living in recently industrialised centres would also become a topic of *malaise* and excitement, as an urban working class was rapidly growing due to the mass migration from country to city for work in factories, shops, homes, bars, and brothels.

Using a rhetoric rooted in social Darwinism, Émile Durkheim wrote on the “violent modern crowds [that] embodied a savage barbarism associated with unconscious elements of human nature that had survived evolution;”¹⁰⁸ this perceived modernity of the existent ‘savagery’ within Europe’s own populations is seen as both “as threat and promise.”¹⁰⁹ Here, we see the reoccurring contradiction of Modernist primitivism in that this supposedly primitive element of these urban crowds was considered essentially modern by artists and writers of the period: “What was most ancient in crowds, the ‘residues’ they manifested of savage life, was precisely what made them so ‘modern’—and therefore both a symptom of ... decadent civilization and a potential bulwark against it.”¹¹⁰ Rejecting the fixed repertoire of themes and genres deemed suitable by the Academy, artists such as Manet and Toulouse-Lautrec preferred to depict the ““spontaneity” and “crudity” of urban working-class culture both in style and their evocation of the cafés-concerts, nightclubs, bars, and cafés where workers and *déclassé* bohemians gathered after hours.”¹¹¹ This kind of low-brow subject matter hardly

¹⁰⁸ Durkheim quoted by Barkan and Bush, “Introduction,” 14.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Antliff and Leighton 182.

corresponded to the Academy's belief that, "Art was supposed to uphold public morality by depicting edifying moments from history and mythology."¹¹²

This marginality was often self-proclaimed in that the artist embraced the role of the socioeconomically marginalised, romantically aligning himself with the working class urban plebs as can be seen in the writings of nineteenth-century *poètes maudits* as Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, and Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire, in particular, is well-known for his praise of the *flâneur* who engages in the (distinctly male) activity of roaming the urban landscape with no fixed aim; he writes: "The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird's and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. ... To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere."¹¹³ At the same time, while the *bourgeois* Baudelaire's *flâneur* had points of entry into more 'plebeian' lifestyles and activities, he was never fully an insider either. The *flâneur*'s ideal was to be "*déclassé* ('outside class') to the extent that he could never fully participate in bourgeois social life or with the life of the masses—he could mingle with the crowd but never fully be part of it."¹¹⁴

This need to play the role of the outsider is also found in some Modernist artists' expressed desires to go the imagined ends of the world. According to Gill Perry, the *avant-garde* artist was expected to play "the role as a rediscoverer or prophet of some more direct, 'primitive' mode of expression;" unsurprisingly then, the practice of "the going away" to the ... supposed margins of civilization came to be seen as a crucial

¹¹² MacGaffey 249.

¹¹³ Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," [1859-60] *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 105.

¹¹⁴ Briony Fer, "Surrealism, Myth and Psychoanalysis," *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art between the Wars*, ed. B. Fer, D. Batchelor and P. Wood (Yale University Press, 1993), 183.

feature of late nineteenth-century avant gardism.”¹¹⁵ This desire shares obvious similarities with the aims and experiences of ethnographers as identified above. And although *flânerie* is usually used to describe the activities of the outsider/insider observer within an urban context, one finds parallels in such examples as Gauguin’s. In his case, the metropolitan tradition of *flânerie* is arguably extended first to the French countryside to discover peasant culture and subsequently to the French colony of Tahiti, where Gauguin hoped to escape what he considered “the aged, corrupt, Western civilization that spawned him.”¹¹⁶ This perspective is epitomised in a letter to August Strindberg (penned in 1895, it would be later reproduced in an exhibition catalogue as a kind of artist statement), in which Gauguin assumes the role of the marginalised outsider, proudly speaking of the “clash between your civilization and my barbarism A civilization from which you are suffering; a barbarism which spells rejuvenation for me.”¹¹⁷ Likewise, Picasso, in talking about his work, liked to say he had African origins to suggest his innate barbarism.¹¹⁸

We see a similar desire to renew Western art through the embracing of the socially marginalised within the *art brut* movement,¹¹⁹ the muses and participants of which were perceived as more inherently intuitive, usually because of their mental

¹¹⁵ Perry 8.

¹¹⁶ Perloff 235.

¹¹⁷ Gauguin quoted in Perloff 226.

¹¹⁸ Michael North, “Modernism’s African Mask: The Stein-Picasso Collection,” Barkan and Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, 277.

¹¹⁹ Also known as “outsider art,” “folk art,” “instinctive art,” or “visionary art,” or in Québec, *arts indisciplinés* (to identify but a few terms). Dedicated to such art practices, the magazine *Raw Vision*’s website offers a useful overview of these terms: <http://www.rawvision.com/outsiderart/whatisoa.html> . (accessed on April 23, 2008).

insanity,¹²⁰ use of automatist strategies, or socially marginal status.¹²¹ Writing within the context of the post-World War II Europe, the French artist, Jean Dubuffet, considered the spiritual “grandfather” of the movement writes, “I believe very much in the value of savagery. I mean instinct, passion, mood, violence, madness.”¹²² His vision of a sterile European culture in dire need of revitalisation is strikingly similar to the earlier rhetoric of the Romantic and turn-of-the-century *avant-garde* artists:

I think this culture is very much like a dead language, without anything in common with the language spoken in the street. This culture drifts further and further from daily life. It is confined to certain small and dead circles ... It no longer has real and living roots.”¹²³

As Joanne Cubbs writes, “The discourse surrounding the works and lives of self-taught makers, or so-called Outsider Artists is, in many ways, a perfect site for the reproduction of Romantic/outsider ideology.”¹²⁴ Those that best fit this image of the transgressive outcast are, specifies Cubbs, “social isolates and eccentrics, religious visionaries, and the inhabitants of mental hospitals, prisons, small rural towns, city slums and the streets” though sometimes “[t]he merely uneducated, the elderly, and the impoverished are sometimes candidates as well.”¹²⁵ To support those that are considered unquestionably marginal, champions of *art brut* like Dubuffet “believed that he was opposing the tyranny

¹²⁰ Given their strong interest in the Freudian concept of the unconscious, Surrealist artists, emerging in the post-World War I context, equally shared this fascination with the mentally insane, creating, as one art historian writes, a kind of “cult of insanity.” (Hopkins 102)

¹²¹ See David MacLagan, “Outsiders or Insider?” in Hiller, ed., *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*, 32-49 for categories of outsider art.

¹²² Jean Dubuffet, “Anticultural Positions,” 1951, Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch, eds., *Primitivism and twentieth-century art: a documentary history* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003), 292.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Joanne Cubbs, “Rebels, Mystics, and Outcasts: The Romantic Artist Outsider,” *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, eds. Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf Jr. (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 84-85.

¹²⁵ Cubbs 85.

of the established order and the system of official culture.”¹²⁶ At the same time, as David MacLagan points out, art practices that appear to function outside the art world are nonetheless “intimately dependent upon the idioms which they subvert” functioning therefore simply as a “‘negative’ or reversed version of the aesthetic criteria of conventional art.”¹²⁷

Connoisseurship within the *art brut* movement was rooted in an admiration and an idealisation for the un-self-conscious, more authentic natures of the creators; likewise, children’s art would become extremely important touchstones for some Modernist artists. According to Sue Malvern, “At its most intense from the 1880s until at least around 1914, but extending for most of the twentieth century, it amounted to a virtual ‘cult of childhood’.”¹²⁸ Baudelaire, writing at the time, enthuses, “The child sees everything as a novelty; the child is always ‘drunk.’ Nothing is more like what we call inspiration than the joy the child feels in drinking in shape and colour.” For Baudelaire then, artistic brilliance could be attained then if one could just harness one’s inner child for “genius is no more than childhood recaptured at will.”¹²⁹ Following this model, Modernist artists curated exhibitions of children’s art, collected and published children’s art, and taught children art,¹³⁰ while in their own art practices, some “tried to re-embodiment the child’s unity of perception, his lack of prudery and inhibition.”¹³¹

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ MacLagan 34.

¹²⁸ Sue Malvern, “The Ends of Innocence: Modern Art and Modern Children” (*Art History* 23.4) 2000, 627.

¹²⁹ Baudelaire 104-105.

¹³⁰ Malvern 627-32.

¹³¹ Juliet Dusinberre, *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children’s Books and Radical Experiments in Art* (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1987), 22.

Rooted in such values as “escape, fantasy, reverie, and revolt”,¹³² the trope of the artist as outsider has been firmly embedded in the history of Western art as a paradigm at least since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, if not before. Joanne Cubbs explains that within the Romantic framework, artists were portrayed as “rebels or adversaries of established culture. Contemptuous of social conventions, past aesthetic traditions, and cultural orthodoxies of any kind, this image of the artist outside challenged the authority of the status quo.”¹³³ According to Cubbs, the notion of the artist-as-outsider is not mere myth but “a cultural belief system that has actively shaped the convictions, behaviour, works, and lives of many modern and contemporary artists as well as the perceptions and expectations of the society that surrounds them.”¹³⁴ Finally, Cubbs notes rather pointedly that within this quasi-mythic paradigm, women are rarely members, for “the outsider myth is primarily a heroic male text.”¹³⁵

Frances S. Connelly argues in *The Sleep of Reason* that *avant-garde* nineteenth-century artists’ appropriation of non-Western art did not really break away from academic traditions as their action was still based on a belief in the existence of precivilised, barbaric, irrational, sexual societies as the polar opposite of their own. Rather, Connelly claims that, “The critical difference lay in their rejection of the classical center, a rejection that led them to embrace its presumed opposite, the peripheral “primitive.”¹³⁶ In fact, Connelly argues that the embracing of the peripheral has always been a strategy of renewal within Western art history. The significance of the peripheral

¹³² Cubbs 77.

¹³³ Ibid. 78.

¹³⁴ Ibid. 79.

¹³⁵ Ibid. 91.

¹³⁶ Connelly 34.

simply evolves over time; what was once considered marginal is eventually accepted, becoming part of dominant and accepted art practice:

In the progression of primitivism in the visual arts from the late eighteenth century to the earlier twentieth, the peripheral boundaries of modern European cultures were extended as the those elements that had existed on the fringe were assimilated. The peripheral net was cast farther and wider as a voracious modern culture incorporated one “primitive” style after another more radically “other,” moving beyond its own historical “primitive” of ancient Greece to its own contemporary “folk” primitives to the Japanese “primitive” and, finally, to the outer reaches of the “primitive,” the Oceanic and the African.”¹³⁷

Despite the high level of importance that Modernists and their predecessors placed on the marginal, we see that its supposed radical potential is quickly absorbed, if not neutralised, by the very institutional structure that they wish to rebel against. Moreover, if this is the way that the art system works and evolves, it is difficult to say whether there is any radicalism at all or whether the art system is simply playing itself out endlessly. At the same time, we see just how powerful the myth of the outsider artist remains. Though acknowledging Picasso’s referencing, if not outright appropriation, of African masks for example, the curator of “*Primitivism*” in *Twentieth Century Art*, William Rubin, still refuses to give due credit to the impact of these non-Western influences on Picasso’s art practice. Clinging at all costs to the idea of the myth of the inspired artist-as-outsider autonomously breaking the boundaries of Western art practice, Rubin claims in his curatorial essay, “That tribal art influenced Picasso and many of his colleagues in significant ways is beyond question. But that it caused no fundamental change in the direction of modern art is equally true.”¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Ibid. 35.

¹³⁸ William Rubin, “Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction,” “*Primitivism*” in *Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. Vol. 1. (NY: MOMA, 1984), 17.

Current Articulations of Primitivism

If, as Hal Foster has posited, primitivism is the essential “binary ratio” of Western culture, it is not difficult to find manifestations, be they vilifying or venerating, of this malleable movement within contemporary visual culture. Derogatory representations of those of Arab origin within North American mainstream media, particularly after the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States, can be viewed in the *us-versus-them* vein of primitivism. Racial profiling and restrictive immigration policies *vis-à-vis* persons of non-European descent in North America and Europe can also be linked to this phenomenon. On the flip side, the recent rise of reality shows can be connected to the primitivist cult of authenticity. An example is the popular reality television series, *Survivor*, shot in “the wild” of various countries (Fiji, China), in which participants are divided into “tribes” and asked to compete in a variety of survival tasks. Tourism websites and travel brochures encourage prospective customers to escape the restriction and stress of urban living for the preferred idyllic, supposedly hedonistic experience of tropical (read *primitive*) life. The popularity of so-called tribal tattoos and body piercings also suggests an overarching aesthetic of the primitive. Originating in 1995, the film manifesto *Dogme 95* called for the countering of bourgeois decadence (as represented by the generation of Western *auteur* filmmakers that since their early careers in the 1960s have since become canonised) through the application of a stripped-down aesthetic in which only natural lighting and hand-held cameras were permitted (just two of *Dogme 95*'s many rules). As detailed by its founding members, Lars von Trier and Thomas

Vinterberg,¹³⁹ this movement combines the avant-gardist anti-*bourgeois* ambitions and desire for authenticity that marked Modernist primitivism. Pornographic websites and chat rooms also present the public with depictions of sexuality that, though mediated by web cameras and laptop computer screens, offer a heightened sense of immediacy and reality that goes beyond commercially produced pornographic films. The above are but a few examples of current examples of primitivism as articulated in contemporary society. Primitivism, we shall see, equally pervades Clark's *oeuvre* and his discourse about his work, though this time in relation to youth, particularly those male. In Chapters 2 and 3, I will explore the ways in which primitivism and his representations of male adolescence are intrinsically intertwined, specifically in relation to his imagery of subcultures, sexuality, and gender.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ See Dogme 95's official website for more details: <http://www.dogme95.dk/> (accessed April 27, 2008).

¹⁴⁰ For the purposes of this thesis and due to limitations of time and space, I will focus primarily on these three questions as they intersect with primitivism in Clark's photography and films.

Chapter 2

Le goût de l'autre: Savage Studies and the Allegiance to Youth

Within the history of photography, Larry Clark is usually written about as part of a “generation of photographers who worked to cast light on their particular lifestyle considered by mainstream America to be in opposition to traditional cultural values.”¹⁴¹ This reputation for autobiographical work dedicated to the documenting of marginal or subcultural groups is undoubtedly due to Clark’s first two books, *Tulsa* and *Teenage Lust*. *Tulsa* features a series of photographs revolving around members of an underground drug scene, one in which Clark and his friends took active part. His second book, *Teenage Lust*, subtitled “An Autobiography by Larry Clark” (presented in the artist’s handwritten scrawl), loosely takes the form of a first-person narrative, featuring among others photographs of Clark. The book tracks Clark’s transformation from cute little boy with neatly combed hair to gaunt, frizzy-haired adult, culminating with a long, rambling rant in which he discusses his dysfunctional family, his development as a photographer and artist, the inspirations for *Tulsa* and *Teenage Lust*, as well as numerous drug-related, sexual, and criminal exploits involving himself and friends. Although his inclusion of photographs detailing the sexual activities of teenagers and portraits of male street hustlers in NYC suggest a less-than-strict definition of autobiography, *Teenage Lust*, remains similar to *Tulsa* in its shoot-from-the-hip documentary approach to members of groups whose daily existence hardly correspond to conventional notions of the “good” life: prostitutes, petty criminals, drug addicts, and so forth.

¹⁴¹ William S. Johnson et al, *Photography from 1839 to today: George Eastman House*, Rochester, NY (Köln: Taschen, 2000), 664.

In the latter part of his career, Clark turned to cinema with such films as *Kids*, *Bully*, *Ken Park*, and *Wassup Rockers*, though without abandoning his photographic practice. Despite this shift in medium, Clark's focus on marginalised or delinquent male youth groups remains consistent. No longer fitting the realm of non-fiction however, these works nonetheless retain the documentary quality of Clark's early work thanks to his frequent employment of natural lighting, hand-held cameras, and non-professional actors. One critic writes, his films "leave us with the vestigial feeling of watching the mating habits of animals in a wildlife documentary on the Discovery channel."¹⁴² The anthropological aura surrounding his work is boosted by Clark's extended participant-observer research process,¹⁴³ allowing him to capture the characteristic details of each subculture that he depicts. In effect, his *oeuvre* entire is characterised by an up-close study of his subjects that walks the line between an apparent detachment suggesting Clark's desire to create a relatively unbiased portrait of his young subjects' experiences and a voyeurism conveying his not-so-impartial identification with and objectification of youth. This uneasy combination of viewpoints found throughout his work (as well as the mixed reactions that they engender in audiences, ranging from shock to curiosity to titillation) recalls what Julia E. Liss describes as, "the experience of ethnology, the alternation between alienation and attraction."¹⁴⁴ Moreover, despite their tight focus on members of specific subcultures, Clark's films nonetheless construct a universalising teen episteme that should (or so he tells us) apply to all youth.

¹⁴² Sudhir Mahadevan, "'Perfect Childhoods': Larry Clark Puts Boys on Screen," *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth*, eds. Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 102.

¹⁴³ Participant-observer research is usually associated with such anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski, Frantz Boas, and Margaret Mead.

¹⁴⁴ Liss 128.

In this chapter, I will examine *Tulsa, Wassup Rockers* (2006), and *Los Angeles 2003-2006* (2007) using Clark's focus on subcultures as a crucial point of entry. In my analysis, I will make use of key notions from Dick Hebdige's *Subculture* and Hal Foster's "The Artist as Ethnographer" as well as reference practices of visual anthropology, including traditions of ethnographic film and photography, and *cinéma vérité*. In so doing, I wish to understand how Clark's self-defined "visual anthropology"¹⁴⁵ approach to representing male youth-associated groups corresponds to and diverges from primitivist perspectives, particularly in relationship to ethnological practices and the marginal as discussed in Chapter 1. To conclude, I will explore how Clark's observer-participant approach to researching and representing male-associated youth subcultures lends credibility to his art practice, especially given Western art's ongoing fascination with (marginal and deviant) youth and the artist-as-outsider myth.

Tulsa Forever

Originally from Tulsa, Oklahoma, Larry Clark picked up photography in his teens in the 1950s while firstly working as an assistant for his mother who ran a door-to-door baby photography business (what he ironically calls "kidnapping"¹⁴⁶ in one interview) and later studying commercial photography at a school in Milwaukee. According to Clark, given the fact that he had a camera for his work in the family business, it was "organic and totally natural"¹⁴⁷ that he would start photographing his friends; in his words: "I just happened to have my camera ... It was totally innocent; there was no

¹⁴⁵ [no author given] "Pataphysics Magazine Interview with Larry Clark," *Pataphysics* (Holiday Resort Issue 2003) http://www.pataphysicsmagazine.com/clark_interview.html. (accessed Feb. 12, 2006).

¹⁴⁶ Clark quoted in Paul Schrader, "Babes in the Hood: Interview with Larry Clark," *Artforum* vol. 33 (May 1995): 74.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

purpose to the photographs. There was a purity to them that wasn't planned; it was realism."¹⁴⁸ *Tulsa*, is the result of this initial overtly autobiographical stage in Clark's practice, what the art historian, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, describes as the "confessional mode," a term she uses in reference to the practice of those photographers "who deploy a photographic rhetoric of lived experience, privileged knowledge, and who declare both rhetorically and visually the photographer's personal stake in the substance of the representations."¹⁴⁹ Compiled of brief fragments of occasional text in conjunction with a series of black-and-white photographs from three different periods spent in Tulsa (respectively 1963, 1968, and 1971), *Tulsa* features a group of Clark's friends (two of whom are identified as Billy Mann and David Roper) hanging out, shooting up, brandishing guns. A loose narrative evolves that, in the most simple of terms, could be described as a group of young men and their wives or girlfriends who become progressively strung out on amphetamine.¹⁵⁰ Apparently, during this era, it was possible to access this drug in the form of "Valo, a nasal inhaler purchased for a dollar in drugstores. The large amount of amphetamine in it could be worked up and injected."¹⁵¹

At the time of its publication in 1971, *Tulsa* was remarked on for its honest portrayal of so-called "speed freaks," a group not previously depicted in the media and therefore little known by the general public. As the curator, Philip Monk, reminds us,

¹⁴⁸ Clark quoted in Gus Van Sant, "Larry Clark, shockmaker," *Interview* (July 1995).

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_n7_v25/ai_17249090/print (accessed April 18, 2006).

¹⁴⁹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Inside/Out," *Public Information: Desire, Disaster, Document* [catalogue] (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 52.

¹⁵⁰ *Tulsa's* style and subject matter have been important for such film directors as Gus Van Sant and Francis Ford Coppola. Van Sant mentions Clark's *Tulsa* in the credits of the film, *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), based on a true story about a group of drug addicts on the run and who supply their habit by robbing drugstores. Coppola's S.E. Hinton series borrows from *Tulsa's* formal aesthetic; this is evident particularly in the case of *Rumble Fish* (1983), a film about youth gangs that is shot in lush black and white against the stark backdrop of Clark's hometown, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

¹⁵¹ Philip Monk, "Larry Clark: Outlaw Artist," *The American Trip: Larry Clark, Nan Goldin, Cady Noland, Richard Prince* [catalogue] (Toronto: Power Plant, 1996), 15.

“While we now know this milieu from Beat literature by the likes of Kerouac and Burroughs or from that of Hubert Selby Jr., theirs was a clandestine, not the popular drug culture ... [of] the 1960s.”¹⁵² Clark reaffirms this clandestinity, stating, “it was a secret life style. ... Drugs weren’t mentioned back then.”¹⁵³ Reading a 1971 review of *Tulsa*, dramatically titled, “A Devastating Portrait of An American Tragedy,” we are reminded that the book was received as a first *visual*—as opposed to merely *textual*—glimpse into an underground drug culture, even more scandalous because this mix of drugs, guns, and violence was taking place in white, Christian, small-town America:

this is a book about drugs; specifically speed freaks, who daily (even almost hourly) inject billion-volt charges of chemicals that blast their bodies into towering, God-rush highs (and which leaves the mind and body ultimately as hollow and used-up as a rusting roadside beer can).¹⁵⁴

Moreover, *Tulsa* purportedly offered not only access into a little known American drug culture, but an *insider’s* viewpoint, as confirmed by the book’s epigraph in which Clark describes his own very personal engagement with the subject matter of the book:

i was born in tulsa oklahoma in 1943. when i was sixteen i started shooting amphetamine. i shot with my friends everyday for three years and then left town but i’ve gone back through the years. once the needle goes in, it never comes out. L.C.

A self-identified drug addict, Clark explicitly emphasises here his link with this group of marginals, that is to say, his *insider* status within the *outsider* community of drug users—what Solomon-Godeau identifies as a “certificate of authenticity.”¹⁵⁵ Undoubtedly, *Tulsa’s* seductive power lies partly in its ability to give viewers the feeling of a privileged perspective into a subculture—and moreover, one that is living outside the boundaries of

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Mike Kelley, “Larry Clark: In Youth is Pleasure,” *Flash Art* no. 164 (May-June 1992): 84.

¹⁵⁴ Dick Cheverton, “A Devastating Portrait of An American Tragedy,” *Detroit Free Press* (November 7, 1971) [no page number given, featured in its entirety on the back cover of the 2000 edition of *Tulsa*].

¹⁵⁵ Solomon-Godeau 56.

the law—but also a thrill in the awareness that Clark’s implication is not just one of observer but of participant.

Certain aspects of Dick Hebdige’s seminal work, *Subculture*, offer an interesting lens through which to examine Clark’s depiction of the specific drug culture represented in *Tulsa*. Influenced by the Marxist notion of ideology, Hebdige begins by defining the sociopolitical function of hegemony as follows: “a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert ‘total social authority’ over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas.”¹⁵⁶ Rather these “subordinate groups are, if not controlled; then at least contained within an ideological space which does not seem at all ‘ideological’”: which appears instead to be permanent and ‘natural.’”¹⁵⁷ Hebdige describes subcultures as working-class groups that present a challenge to hegemony not necessarily through direct confrontation but expressed through clothing, make-up, and hair, as exemplified by the 1970s British punk scene. In other words, subculture can be defined as “a form of resistance in which experienced contradictions and objections to ... ruling ideology are obliquely represented in style.”¹⁵⁸ Hebdige further posits that, “spectacular subcultures express forbidden contents ... in forbidden forms (transgression of sartorial and behavioral codes, law breaking, etc.). They are profane articulations and they often and significantly defined as ‘unnatural.’”¹⁵⁹ Interestingly though subcultures are defined in terms of the marginalised by the mainstream media (if not ignored completely), Hebdige argues that they equally “articulate to a greater or lesser extent some of the *preferred* meanings and

¹⁵⁶ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1979), 15-16.

¹⁵⁷ Hebdige 16.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 87.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 91-2.

interpretations ... favoured by and transmitted through the authorized channels of mass communication.”¹⁶⁰ In other words, subcultures perceive themselves often in accordance to their representation by the media. In this way, a kind of circle is established in which members participate, and by this token, corroborate in their own representation as a degenerate, depraved lot. Finally, Hebdige suggests that subcultures not only *reflect* a sociocultural and economic breakdown within a society (unemployment, poverty, disintegration of the family unit), but also ‘dramatise’ these changes.¹⁶¹

How is this stylistic challenge to hegemony, if at all, expressed in Clark’s photos? In the first section of *Tulsa* (titled “1963”), Clark concentrates on two young white men (David Roper and Billy Mann) who look perhaps a bit scruffy but still quite presentable; the viewer does not automatically imagine them doing drugs. An all-American, blonde-haired David Roper is shown at home (in front of a picture of Jesus and a mantelpiece filled with ceramic vases and fake flowers) (figure 11) or carousing in idyllic natural surroundings wearing khakis and Keds (figure 12). In 2008, given our familiarity with drug-related imagery from Hollywood films (*Drugstore Cowboy*, *Rush*, *Blow*, *Trainspotting*, *Casino*, etc.) and its spin-off gritty-but-glamorous aesthetic (as epitomised by ‘heroin chic’ within the fashion and advertising milieu), we might be most surprised by how these boys’ clothing style, at first, does *not* appear to reflect their drug use. This surprise comes from the *frisson*-inducing knowledge of their drug use in juxtaposition with the surface conventionality of their pompadours or buzz cuts, their buttoned-down shirts, and muscled young bodies. In this way, they do not fit the

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 86.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* 87.

Hebdiagian idea of challenge to hegemony through style—their dress concealing if not *contradicting* their rejection of mainstream lifestyles rather than reflecting them.¹⁶²

As the men grow older in the later sections of the book (1968, 1971) however, the look becomes more typically or recognisably anti-establishment: moustaches, hair worn long, sloppy, casual clothing (plaid and denim shirts), rings and necklaces worn on both men and women. Given their transformation in terms of dress and grooming (from fairly clean-cut to overtly scruffy), these young men, in the later pictures, appear to adopt the style of other countercultural youth movements taking place across North America. Furthermore, while in the early shots, the images occur outside, in cars, or in living rooms, the latter photographs take place primarily in bedrooms, amongst rumpled sheets and dirty walls covered with posters. Within Hebdige's framework, Clark's photographs can be said thus to picture this breakdown of the traditionally upright values and stable structure of mainstream American society.

Notwithstanding Clark's personal (corporeal, psychological, emotional) engagement in this youth-based drug culture, this does not prevent him from taking a show-and-tell approach to the images featured in *Tulsa* and the order that they appear. At times, in fact, there is a heavily didactic feel to the book. In one sequence of sixteen-millimetre film clips¹⁶³ featured in middle of the book for example, he shows a series of

¹⁶² We find here equally another visual paradox which was to become omnipresent in Clark's *oeuvre*: "bad" boys with the faces of angels appears again and again in his subsequent practice—from photographs of NYC street hustlers in *Teenage Lust* to a book of video stills taken from television footage of handsome male youths up for rape charges (presented with no commentary). See Larry Clark, *Larry Clark* [exhibition catalogue] (Groningen, Holland: Groninger Museum, 1999).

¹⁶³ In his interview with Paul Schrader, Clark explains that this film section was from when he "borrowed a movie camera and shot some footage, but doing it all by myself didn't work." In response to Schrader's question if the film sequences were planned out or not, he says, "I was just there and I had the camera and I would raise it and start working. But it wasn't practical, so I went back with the Leica." (Clark quoted in Schrader 76).

up-close shots of the bulging vein of an arm prepped for the insertion of a needle that suggests illustrations found in a how-to book or film (figure 13). In another, Clark makes use of a simple cause-and-effect diptych format composed of a photograph of a young man inserting a needle into his leg, followed by another in which he responds to the rush of the drug, wide eyes and mouth fixed in a Munchian, almost inhuman mask-like scream (figure 14). Moreover, despite the minimum presence of contextualising annotations accompanying the images—commentary that could direct the reader’s understanding of his point of view, Clark organises the book into a loose narrative whose chapters could imaginably be interpreted according to such clichés as “youthful folly,” or “corruption/experience.” At the same time, his apparent desire to show-and-tell about this youth-based drug culture yet also make the work “look sexy”¹⁶⁴ often results in a strange mix of the pedagogical with the aesthetically pleasurable. His insistence on the reality of the situations is, as Hal Foster has posited, a “coded realism (as in the bohemian romance of photography vérité of Larry Clark, Nan Goldin, Jack Pierson, and others).”¹⁶⁵

Given the strong narrative and at times, didactic thrust of *Tulsa*, it is interesting to note that in an interview for *Flash Art*, Clark cites W. Eugene Smith, the *Life* photojournalist known for his command of the photo-essay within the post-World War II era with such famous features as *Country Doctor* (1948) (figure 15) and *Nurse Midwife* (1951) as an early influence:

I was exposed to ... a lot of the documentary photography from the old *Life* magazine[sic] the fifties when they were doing those great photo essays. ... [Eugene Smith] was always writing these diatribes about the *truth*, and how he

¹⁶⁴ Clark quoted in Kelley 85.

¹⁶⁵ Hal Foster, “The Return of the Real,” *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: MIT Press, 2001, 4th printing, 1996, 1st ed), 153.

wanted to tell the truth, the truth, the truth. It was a real rebel position. It was kind of like a teenager's position: why can't things be like they should be? Why can't I do what I want? I latched on to that philosophy. ... I wanted to be a storyteller, tell a story.¹⁶⁶

Smith's works are famous for their powerfully iconic imagery and were accompanied by *Life's* editorial and *editorialising* captions that with the objective of maximal legibility, further directed the reader's understanding of the pictures and their intent. However, it is important to note that despite this positioning of the images through text, the images themselves were supposed to be located in a position of objective neutrality, as Erika Doss explains here:

Most of *Life's* photographers also tended to "hide" their cameras, mediating the experience of looking at pictures as a naturalized occurrence and consequently helping to define photo-vision as visual truth. *Life's* pictorial style thus came to be grounded in assumptions of the apparent transparency of images and of their seemingly straightforward sensibility and simple didacticism.¹⁶⁷

Though *Tulsa's* photographs are only sporadically captioned, they could nonetheless be linked with *Life* magazine's "overt educational imperative ("to see and be instructed")"¹⁶⁸ through their famous photo-essay format. Through a strategic ordering of its featured imagery, *Tulsa* ensures a hyper-legibility of content and narrative. If the book begins on the pranks and posturing of a group of young lads, its latter section features images of respectable elders at a funeral and the corpse of a tiny coffin (figure 16), underlining the horrors of the lifestyle it depicts. Moreover, it emphasises this addiction as an inevitably

¹⁶⁶ Kelley 82. Apparently, Clark chooses to ignore here the heroicising thrust of Smith's work as well the editorialising of *Life* magazine's photographic series and its role during the 1940s, '50s and '60s in promoting an "image of America... [as] uniformly positive, a celebration of the nation's pulling together for the war effort, of its growing economy, and subsequently of its burgeoning post-war consumer society ... [with] little social ... conflict" (Miles Orvell, *American Photography, Oxford History of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 117).

¹⁶⁷ Erika Doss, "Introduction: Looking at *Life*: Rethinking America's Favorite Magazine, 1936-1972," *Looking at Life Magazine*, ed. Erika Doss (London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 16.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 4.

continuous cycle and that is passed on from one generation to another: the very last image of *Tulsa* rather tellingly features a youth learning to insert the needle (figure 17). The circular narrational arc characterising *Tulsa*'s drug-related subject matter in which protagonists move from Blakian Innocence to Experience¹⁶⁹ (a cycle that recommences with the new generation) equally intimates the viewer's own shift in terms of his or her knowledge about this subculture and its activities.

In this light, it is interesting to note just to what extent Clark's approach in *Tulsa* shares much with *Life*'s photo-essays, especially in terms of its didacticism. It is true that as user and addict in the Tulsa drug scene of the period that Clark, unlike the magazine's photographers, was in the position to offer up an insider perspective. At the same time, his photographic choices in terms of style and even in subject matter do not necessarily innovate but rather build on *Life*'s photojournalistic traditions. For though *Life*'s seductive photography "catered to modes of representation that stressed continuity and cohesiveness, sameness and universality,"¹⁷⁰ at the same time, its editorial board was interested, especially given its pedagogical mandate, to cover the various countercultural activities of the 1960s, ranging from communes to large-scale rock concerts and, as it happens, drugs. As one historian rhetorically asks (after reminding us that *Life* first did a feature on LSD as early as 1963), "Who knows ... how many school children...figured out how to roll a joint from the October 1969 *Life* photo-essay on marijuana?"¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ William Blake's book of poems, *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), can be divided into two segments as its title suggests: the first half featuring poems that look at the world with the eyes of a child and the latter half through the lens of adulthood.

¹⁷⁰ Doss 16.

¹⁷¹ John Gennari, "Bridging the Two Americas: Life Looks at the 1960s," *Looking at Life Magazine*, ed. Erika Doss (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 261-2.

Tulsa's strongest images are those that remind the viewers that drug use is not necessarily a nightmarish experience but may offer feelings of euphoria and escape to its users. In this way, as viewers we can at least imagine how this specific subculture could base their daily lives around recapturing this rush through the injection of drugs. Interestingly, drug use is strongly linked with pleasure in *Tulsa* only within the first stage of the book (1963) when the boys are at their youngest. For this reason, the gratification of drugs within the first stage of the arc of Clark's pictorial narrative, functions more as a metaphor for the short-lived period of youth, with its vitality and capacity for fun, excitement, and experimentation, and to live in the present with little concern for the future. In this light, Clark's images seem to correspond with Mike Kelley's observation that "puberty and drugs were like a mixed rite of passage."¹⁷² One slightly blurred image for example features four boys in a living room shooting up (figure 18). The looks on their faces suggest the high energy of the scene, their pleasure in being together, their easy camaraderie. The viewer can almost imagine hearing a cacophony of raucous voices interrupting each other accompanied by loud music, and feeling the rush of the drug. It is the lively everyday intimacy depicted in this image that makes the viewer comprehend how Clark might idealise this period of his life both as youth and drug addict. Moreover, it gives possible insight into his latter work which could in this light be described as kind of Proustian attempt to regain lost time and perhaps explain how he could spend his artistic career trying to recapture the youthful euphoria of his own early drug use (before the ravages of addiction began to show) *via* the study and representation of male youth again and again.

¹⁷² Kelley 85.

Clark recurrently juxtaposes opposing imagery of good and bad or innocence and experience—a group of laughing young men shooting up in front of a painting of Christ (figure 18), the black eye on the soft white skin of a young woman, a young man pointing a gun in front of American flag (figure 19), a baby lying on the floor between a fighting couple etc.—intensifies the shock factor while reminding the viewer of the contaminative nearness of drugs in a this-could-be-you! vein. Despite the consistency of his rather formulaic use of binary oppositions in terms of content, it also engenders confusion in the reader's understanding of Clark's position. Is he "challenging the traditional working-class puritanism so firmly embedded in the parent culture"¹⁷³ by depicting this, his subculture? Or is he really just re-representing mainstream values and concerns? Part of the fascination felt when looking at *Tulsa* is undoubtedly rooted in this unresolved confusion underlying Clark's perspectives: personally involved in the subculture as user and observer during three different time periods, he appears both to admire and abhor this lifestyle. In this regard, it is interesting to note that although Clark usually insists in interviews that he only wishes to capture reality as is, he is nonetheless quoted (using *Tulsa* as an example) in one recent article as saying, "I'm always trying to get at the consequences of actions. ... The point is the *consequences*."¹⁷⁴ His comment suggests that, beyond its documentation of a subcultural scene, *Tulsa* has a moralising even conservative thrust, one in which debauched youth are predestined for their deserved downfall. In this way, *Tulsa*'s vision of its young men can be read within the primitivist definition of the "savage" as a dying race, or a group that needs to be tamed and civilised.

¹⁷³ Hebdige 88.

¹⁷⁴ Quoted in David Amsden, "The Cheerful Transgressive," *New York Magazine* (March 28, 2005). <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/art/11608/> (accessed June 16, 2008). This suggests that beyond its documentation of a subcultural scene that *Tulsa* has a moralising even conservative thrust, one in which debauched youth are destined for their deserved downfall.

Skaters Latino-Style: *Wassup Rockers* and *Los Angeles 2003-2007*

As previously mentioned, *Tulsa* seems to have so intrinsically marked Larry Clark's career both professionally and personally that one can talk of his career post-*Tulsa*. One finds the same interest in male youth and subcultures in his later works, the prime difference—and this of course is imperative—is the fact that Clark is no longer a youth himself or the same age as his subjects as was the case with *Tulsa*.¹⁷⁵ Now, when he claims insider status to various youth groups, we are aware that this professed insiderhood does not come easily but is in effect the result of extensive effort on his part, no matter what his claims to the contrary. Style, dress, and activities are learned and studied through extended periods of time spent with these young men in order for Clark to be able to represent them realistically. *Wassup Rockers* (2006) and *Los Angeles 2003-2006* (2007) are Clark's most recent attempts at this.

Before beginning my analysis of these works, I would like to briefly explain my decision to look at these works together. Though the film, *Wassup Rockers*, and the exhibition/catalogue *Los Angeles 2003-2006*¹⁷⁶ could be regarded as separate projects, in effect they function as an ensemble piece. *Wassup Rockers* is a fictional account of a day in the life of a group of high-school-age Latino skateboarders. *Los Angeles 2003-2006* features images of Jonathan Velasquez (who as Clark emphasises in a statement at the beginning of his book is neither a model nor an actor) who plays the main protagonist in

¹⁷⁵ In this way, Clark's *oeuvre* can be interpreted as an attempt to regain lost youth. Thanks to Dr. Martha Langford for this observation.

¹⁷⁶ The exhibition was featured at the Lühring Augustine gallery in New York City from September 8 to October 13, 2007 and accompanied by a publication of the same title.

Wassup Rockers and from whose life the film draws from heavily. The interrelatedness of these works is further manifested in the documentary thrust of both the film and exhibition/catalogue: *Wassup Rockers*' documentary roots are suggested by Clark's decision to use non-actors (many of the characters have the same name as their film counterparts) essentially playing close-to-life versions of themselves, and to encourage improvisation, while *Los Angeles 2003-2006* is closer to photojournalism. For these reasons, I will refer to them as interconnected projects.

In many ways, this exhibition and its accompanying catalogue function as photographic proof of Clark's engagement with Jonathan Valesquez and his friends, with whom the former spent time and photographed over the four-year span of 2003-2006, both before and after the making of the film.¹⁷⁷ In effect, these photographs propose a point of entry into the real lives of the youth who inspired the film. In the photographs featured in the book and exhibition, the viewer follows random shots of Jonathan and his group of friends at different periods. The book, unlike the exhibition, begins with a contextualising text handwritten by Clark¹⁷⁸ in which he describes how he met Jonathan at age 14 who he describes as "a just 14 year old (5-5-89) latino [sic] living with his family in South Central Los Angeles. He is not a model. He was not an actor."

Clark writes, "I just hung out with Jonathan and his friends as they grew up." This kind of personal implication (both physical and psychological) on his part can be compared to anthropological fieldwork. Although Clark emphasises his relationship with

¹⁷⁷ In the "Director's Commentary" of the film on DVD, Clark discusses how from the time of meeting the young skateboarders, he spends every Saturday with them and it is only after more than a year later (14-15 months)—the photographs from this period before the making of the film being featured in the catalogue—that he begins the process of making a film.

¹⁷⁸ The use of handwriting, with its Romantic implications of the authentic gesture of the artist here also strategically highlights Clark's personal engagement with this project.

these boys here, he himself is never depicted in the photographs (in fact he turns up only once at the end of the book after the credits). His role as observer-participant thus is not seen but primarily suggested, especially when the subjects look toward the camera. Clark's absence thus renders the aforementioned statement ambiguous. On the one hand, he draws attention to the time and energy spent with his subjects. On the other, with his supremely casual qualifier "just hung out," he seems to unassumingly imply that this book is the simple result of a friendly exchange between peers. By this token, does he attempt to efface the many observable boundaries between himself and this group of boys? Moreover, is Clark equally trying to undermine the concrete differences between actual time spent with Jonathan and friends, and his photographic, that is to say, *meditated* representation of them? In other words, Clark claims first that, his presence did not create a change in the boys' behaviour (in any case, he does imply by this comment that he was able to blend in and even in a sense *be* one of them despite difference in terms of age, ethnicity, and economic standing),¹⁷⁹ and second, that there is no difference between the day-to-day reality of these boys and his photographic depiction of them.

Thanks to poststructural debates in anthropology however, participatory anthropological fieldwork in the late 20th century has been reappraised. As Kirsten Hastrup reminds us, "fieldwork ... is differently conceived in the post-postivist era.

¹⁷⁹ Clark reiterates this in a recent article in *The Guardian*: "'They accepted me. They get what I'm doing too. The thing is,' he says without irony, 'if I wasn't cool I couldn't get within two miles of these kids.'" (Sean O'Hagan, "The kids stay in the picture," *The Guardian* (February 17, 2008) <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/art/photography/story/0,,2256421,00.html> (accessed Feb. 17, 2008).

However in the *Wassup Rockers* DVD's "Director Commentary," Clark admits to sending out his pretty young girlfriend, Tiffany Limos, to talk to them the first time—a kind of 'bait' for his 'prey'; photographs of boys' first encounter with her are in fact featured in the exhibition catalogue.

Participation is no longer seen as just a technique that yields objective data.”¹⁸⁰ Moreover, she offers up a *caveat* about the nature of photography itself, particularly in regards to its usage within the fields of anthropology and ethnography: “visual documentation has an immense power of seduction,” she writes, “because the distance between reality and representation has been negated. This is the powerful *trompe-l’oeil* of ethnographic images.”¹⁸¹

Clark’s introductory statement to *Los Angeles 2003-2006* suggests that his perception of his own practice leans toward the category of the *trompe-l’oeil*.¹⁸² Yet paradoxically, his presence and its effects are nonetheless felt throughout this series. If *Tulsa* privileges photographs in which his subjects do not look into the camera¹⁸³ (implying perhaps their greater level of comfort, as in the case of *Tulsa*, Clark was their actual peer in terms of age and background), *Los Angeles 2003-2006*, by contrast, features many photographs in which Jonathan and his friends appear profoundly aware of the camera and Clark’s presence. Several of the images are frontal shots with the gaze of the subjects fixed on the camera and these images do not often feature the boys showing off for the camera. In some ways, the book appears like a high-end album of snapshots

¹⁸⁰ Kirsten Hastrup, “Anthropological visions: some notes on visual and textual authority,” *Film as Ethnography*, eds. Peter Ian Crawford and David Turton (Manchester and NY: Manchester University Press, 1992) 12.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² The effect of the *trompe-l’oeil* goes beyond the field of ethnographic imagery but appearing rather as a phenomenon that automatically occurs with the use of camera. In reference to Jean-Louis Beaudry’s notion of “the world appearing to speak itself,” Solomon-Godeau explains that it is “the illusionism of the cinematic apparatus (and by implication, all camera-generated imagery) by which the presumed image of reality appears to have neither source nor mediation.” (Solomon-Godeau 61).

¹⁸³ In one interview, Clark describes *Tulsa* as having a cinematic quality because of his decision to predominantly feature photographs in which the subjects did not appear aware of the camera: “There was a trick there in the *Tulsa* book that I didn’t even realize until later that makes it look cinematic. No one looks in the camera. If you do a whole book where no one looks at the camera it’s like a movie.” (Clark quoted in Kelley 83).

printed on glossy, expensive paper. The question remains: for whom is this book, Clark or his subjects?

As previously mentioned, *Los Angeles 2003-2006* tracks the evolution of Jonathan over a four-year period, starting at age 14 and ending at 17 (the front and back covers of the book feature two images that frame this period, one of Jonathan at age 14 and the second of Jonathan at age 17). We see, for example, the constantly shifting hairstyles of Jonathan, from dyed blonde streaks to his natural black, from mohawk to buzz cut to long. In the first image of Jonathan, Clark shoots him in a sitting position on his skateboard (he appears to have just landed with his arms slightly raised by the buoyancy of a fall just moments previous) surrounded by the denim-clad legs of his peers (figure 20). Clark appears thus to illustrate his memory of first seeing Jonathan (included in the introduction to the book): “It was like he was dropped out of heaven.” At the same time, though Clark may textually contextualise this photograph within highly romantic even religious terminology, the image itself gives us more information of this group identifiable as a subculture from the coherence of their style; they are dressed similarly enough to suggest a “tribe.” By framing Jonathan between the legs of his friends, not only does Clark train our gaze on his bottle-blond “angel,” but also makes us notice the similarity of the boys’ dress—the prevalence of faded jeans (closefitting rather than baggy), dark t-shirts, and wristbands, while transmitting to the viewer modest details about their lifestyle: battered skateboards, crumpled fast food sandwich wrappers.

The group shots in particular give a strong sense of the stylistic coherence of the group. In one quadryptich entitled, *Jonathan, Louie, Eddie, 2004*, we see three boys dressed in black t-shirts each with some kind of text, logo, or image on the front, each

once again wearing some kind of wristband, decorated with studs or skull-and-crossbones (figure 21). In another quadryptich, Clark shoots a long line of boys posed standing in front of a wire fence, a kind of archetypal class picture but this time with an urban ghetto twist (figure 22). Because they are a fairly large group (eleven in all), their specific style is even more evident than in the previous image: as they are dressed similarly in jeans, t-shirts, and runners, differences can be found mainly in the varying tightness of their pants, the logos or band names their t-shirts feature, whether they wear headgear (caps, toques), go bareheaded, or the length of their hair.

Given the marginalised position of this group of boys in terms of their ethnicity and socio-economic status, it is interesting to note that while others in their neighbourhood mimic the style of the ghetto-based African-American style of oversized pants and flashy jewellery, these boys turn to punk in terms of dress and musical ambitions. Though the original punk scene was usually a working-class articulation of style, offering up parallels to the under privileged socio-economic status of these boys, at the same time, as Hebdige explains in *Subculture*, it was primarily an expression of white ethnicity. Not particularly politicised, Jonathan and his friends are unlikely to be knowledgeable about the history of punk's white working-class roots, but more attracted by its well-known stance of, as described by Stacy Thompson, "aesthetic negation and economic resistance, both of which inflect the entire "punk project," understood as not just punk rock (both recorded and performed) but also ... style (especially clothing)"¹⁸⁴ In their appropriation of key commoditised items of punk dress (wrist bands, studs, black

¹⁸⁴ Stacy Thompson, "Crass Commodities," *Popular Music and Society* vol. 27, no. 3 (2004): 307-308.

t-shirts, tight jeans)¹⁸⁵ that they mix with elements of skater style (knit caps, runners),¹⁸⁶ they continue the tradition of *bricolage*¹⁸⁷ inherent to subcultures, though granted in ways much less spectacular than the extreme juxtapositions of styles found in punk that Hebdige outlines in *Subculture*. Moreover, there is a coherence to their style that differentiates them immediately from the other Latino and African-American youth living in their South Central ghetto neighbourhood whose dress is noticeable for its big, flashy gold jewelry (“bling”), black skull caps, and oversized clothing. By appropriating certain popular, easily recognisable signifiers of punk (studs, tight clothing, the predominance of black in their wardrobe, band t-shirts featuring the names of key groups like The Ramones, The Cure) the boys cobble together a subcultural identity. This unified style-based identity coasts on punk’s “outsider” posturing in a way that highlights and mocks their marginalised standing in their neighbourhood and disenfranchised status (for instance, many of their t-shirts feature such mocking texts as “MISFIT,” “ZERO,” “LOWER CLASS BRATS”) (figure 23). In this way, the boys’ group identity is consolidated; though they share a socio-economic and ethnic background with many of their peers, their style *habitus*,¹⁸⁸ to borrow from Bourdieu, is miles apart.

¹⁸⁵ These reoccurring modes of dress that developed during the punk movement’s initial emergence have been commodities, accessories easily available today in shops dedicated to so-called punk style.

¹⁸⁶ While Jonathan briefly flirts with the more extreme punk-associated hairstyles (dyed hair, mohawk), for the most part, his friends have longish hair and long bangs falling into their eyes, hairstyles more typically akin to those of skaters.

¹⁸⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss’ concept of *bricolage* is defined as a practice wherein “the rules of [the] game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’ ” and by this token, “can reach brilliant unforeseen results.” (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 17). *Bricolage* is crucial for Hebdige’s conception of subcultural style; see Hebdige 102-106.

¹⁸⁸ The notion of *habitus* was developed by Pierre Bourdieu in his seminal sociological document, *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (1979). Influenced by education and other socially determined factors, one’s *habitus* can be defined as “group dispositions to perceive, evaluate and act within the world in a specific way.” (Bridget Fowler, “Pierre Bourdieu,” *Key Writers on Art: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Chris Murray (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 57).

The two aforementioned group quadryptichs do not just give us a sense of this group's style but also of their relationship with each other and with Clark. It is interesting to note that both composite portraits feature the boys playing it up for the camera. In the first image of *Jonathan, Louie, Eddie, 2004* for instance, Jonathan looks toward the camera but in the latter three, he throws himself into the same kind of show-off posturing as his friends: flexed muscles, fake punches, hammy "tough guy" or overly extravagant expressions of pain (figure 21). In the second quadryptich, while the first image is formally frontal, by the next three photographs, about half of the group is no longer facing the viewer but mooning the camera to the great amusement of the others (figure 22).

In his book, *Ethnographic Film*, Karl G. Heider discusses the phenomenon of mugging for the camera, what he classifies as a type of behaviour distortion. According to Heider, mugging is a "stylized performance" signalling "extreme unease at being confronted not with a familiar human face, but with a glass-and-metal contraption."¹⁸⁹ He adds, it "may be a kind of exaggeration of gesture into which a person intuitively feels pushed in order to communicate through the opaque barrier of camera machinery."¹⁹⁰ Although these images may as Heider suggests signal these boys' discomfort with the camera and/or with Clark's presence, as viewers we are likely to enjoy witnessing this shift in their demeanour. By refusing in the latter three images to conduct themselves properly and by interfering with the formality of the first image, they apparently refuse the roles of passive, well-behaved objects and, by this token, articulate a kind of rebellion. Is this a spontaneous and boisterous snubbing of the camera and Clark's presence? At

¹⁸⁹ Karl G. Heider, *Ethnographic Film*, 1976, revised ed. 2006 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press), 91.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

the same time, being aware of Clark's past penchant for portraying boys behaving badly and his prior reputation for showing his subjects half-dressed (we could after all quite plausibly imagine him egging them on to moon the camera or being quite pleased by their decision to do so),¹⁹¹ this knowledge forces us to pose the question as if it is at all possible for these boys to escape the limits of Clark's primitivising perspective of male youth. In this regard, it is useful to remember that many of primitivism's precepts are essentially "a set of projections which is the precondition for their validation."¹⁹²

Kirsten Hastrup discusses the ways in which text, photography, and film can create an overarching sense of reality. In discussing photography *versus* text as a form of documentation within the field of anthropology, she writes, "The photograph remains a thin description of the happening, while the text allows for a thick description"¹⁹³ of the event."¹⁹⁴ According to Hastrup, the photographic image is always lacking without text: "The picture may invoke the memory of the space for the person who experienced it, but it cannot reveal its texture or essence to outsiders."¹⁹⁵ For this reason, she argues that cinema has an advantage, "film, in contrast to photography, does contain a record of movement and of spatial instability"¹⁹⁶ in a way that allows it to go beyond the static "thinness" inherent to the photographic medium.

Clark's decision to include but a brief introductory statement that tells us little more than how he met Jonathan and his friends does not do much to invert this apparent

¹⁹¹ In addition to this photograph, the book features at least three other photographs of Jonathan mooning the camera whether alone or in a group.

¹⁹² Hiller, "Editor's Introduction," 12.

¹⁹³ In her use of the term, Hastrup makes reference to Clifford Geertz' writings on the value of 'thick' over 'thin' descriptions—concepts that Geertz discusses in his call for an anthropology that is *interpretive* rather than merely observational. See Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

¹⁹⁴ Hastrup 10.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 11.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

'thinness' of the photographic imagery. Neither does he include the boys' own statements on their lives or opinions about time spent with Clark, making it difficult for the viewer to ever go beyond a kind of surface admiration for Jonathan's handsome looks and charming friends. Moreover, if Clark gives little "thickening" textual information about the boys or their origins, he does not reveal visually their home lives or give us an idea of their individual backgrounds, other than the fact that they are Latino and live in a Los Angeles ghetto. In this way, the viewer is often kept at arm's length about this kind of contextualising detail, but is offered up close but surface views that tell us more about the boys' evolving faces and hair than their lives in particular. In addition, Clark tightly frames the images so that it is impossible to see the boys' surroundings; the viewer can therefore only focus on the skin and hair of his subjects. In one image for instance, Clark crops his image of Jonathan so closely that we can do nothing but enjoy his subject's attractive looks: smooth skin, delicate pink cheeks, full lips, dark eyes, and long lashes (figure 24). In another image from a year later, Clark comes in even closer on Jonathan's evolving face, and this time we notice his moles, the coarsening of his skin suggested by a few enlarged pores on his cheeks and nose, his slightly uneven front teeth. Other times, Clark switches from these extreme close ups to full length shots, usually in the public arena: the beach, or in front of fences and parking lots. However it is rare that we see them in their own homes, apart from a few shots of Jonathan practicing with his band in what appears to be a sparsely decorated practice room. For this reason, the few images of Jonathan doing normal things, such as gelling his mohawk in a shabby bathroom (figure 25), or sharing a big meal at a large table, covered with baskets of tortillas, foil and wax

paper wrappers, and glasses of water, in a Latin American family-style restaurant, really stand out for the more everyday or domestic details they offer.

The images in the book vacillate between a formal and informal portraiture of Jonathan and his friends in a way that recalls once again Julia E. Liss' idea that the ethnographer walks the line between alienation and attraction *vis-à-vis* his subjects. The more formal photographs seem to suggest an early ethnographic approach in which Jonathan is clearly othered and exoticised. In one headshot, for example, Jonathan is shown with a red mohawk that resembles the colourful plumage of a tropical bird or the traditional headdress of member of an unidentified indigenous tribe (figure 26). Shot against a white stucco wall, the darkness of his skin and the strangeness of his red mohawk are amplified. His vividly coloured hair in conjunction with his brown skin brings to mind the primitivising imagery typical of *National Geographic*.¹⁹⁷ In another, Jonathan appears uncomfortable with being posed: dressed only in boxers, he sits, arms are wrapped tightly around his legs, chin on knees, as if to hide his body from Clark's invasive gaze (figure 27).

The more informal images, resembling carelessly taken everyday snapshots, are not particularly remarkable in terms of style or subject matter, and some of the photographs even have the red digital date stamp of some automatic cameras. The restaurant image, for instance, is emblematic of this style with its off-centre framing and flash bouncing off the wall. The point of interest from these photographs comes primarily from the proximity that they suggest between Clark and his subjects, so close in fact that at times they plausibly could have been taken by one of the boys themselves. Clark

¹⁹⁷ See Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

effectively mimics their perspectives in his creation of amateur snapshots that the boys themselves, *if they had the means to do so* (that is to say, access to the necessary technologies: digital cameras, cell phones with image-taking devices, video or web cameras, computers, Internet connection), might take of each other and then post by the dozen, as is the current practice on such popular social networking sites as MySpace or Facebook. In this vein, there are shots of Jonathan frolicking on the beach, exchanging kisses with various girls, playing guitar, smiling foolishly while surrounded by a group of busty waitresses from Hooters (figure 28). Clark's decision to use colour photography (in contrast to the stark black-and-white visual aesthetic found in *Tulsa* and *Teenage Lust* with all of its high-art associations) further heightens the sense of casual intimacy. In these more casual shots, seemingly chosen from many, Clark manages briefly to go beyond photography's thinness and suggest the "instability" and "movement" of film in his representation of Jonathan and his friends. However, without the aid of any accompanying textual narratives, these often fairly conventional photographs rarely allow the viewer to go beyond the surface of these boys' lives. It is almost as if Clark feels that his ability to appropriate a vernacular style that plausibly could be the boys' style of taking snapshots in terms of style and content is sufficient enough transgression. In this way, we can perhaps concur with Geoffrey Batchen's statement made in light of the many recent museum acquisitions of snapshot collections as well as exhibitions and publications dedicated to the genre, that snapshots have become "the new outsider art,"¹⁹⁸ with all its primitivist connotations of authenticity and being *of the people*. If so, why then doesn't Clark just hand over his camera to the boys and let them take the

¹⁹⁸ Geoffrey Batchen, "Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn," *Speaking of Photography* Lecture Series (Montreal: Concordia University, February 28, 2008).

photographs themselves? I would argue that Clark is less interested in their self-empowerment and more strategically focussed on harnessing their supposed authenticity through the mimicry of their perspectives in his own photographic practice.

Wassup Rockers

The film, *Wassup Rockers*, based on the lives of Jonathan and his friends is perhaps more successful than the photographs in giving us an impression of the “thickness” of their lives, perhaps simply because, as Hastrup suggests, the cinematic medium allows for “movement and spatial instability.”¹⁹⁹ In a nutshell, the film can be described as two days in the life of a group of Latino high school age youth growing up in South Central in Los Angeles: in the first segment, we follow them doing everyday activities in their own neighbourhood, while in the latter segment, they take a trip to skateboard in Beverly Hills and their adventures within this affluent neighbourhood. The second half of the film has a more satirical, comic edge while the first half suggests a more anthropological approach to his subjects. In the first section, Clark creates an almost visceral sense of what it feels like to be this particular group: Latino, teenager, male, into punk rock music and skateboarding. *Wassup Rockers* features many extended, plot-less scenes in which the viewer is afforded up-close examinations of his young subjects’ skin (black peach fuzz moustaches, baby fat, and pimples), hair (long), and style (close-fitting jeans, t-shirts, bandannas tied around their ankles). Moreover, we can listen to the inflections of their accented, mumbled, inarticulate speech, as well as watch them rehearse with their band, hang out with peers after school, skateboard, make out with

¹⁹⁹ Hastrup 11.

girls, lift weights, etc. Clark successfully demonstrates the extreme fluctuations in teenage energy and moods, from the sulky lethargy of waking up to (minutes later) skating at top speed as if their lives depended on it.

Though it is usually applied as a way of defining eras in a manner that goes beyond political and social structures, the cultural theorist Raymond Williams's notion of "structure of feeling" is a useful concept in this regard and pertinent to the examination of the creation of the overall sense of the experience of youth that Clark depends on. In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams defines structure of feeling as "a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or a period."²⁰⁰ In a sense, it is closely linked with style: "Similar kinds of change can be observed in manners, dress, building, and other similar forms of social life"²⁰¹ However, he stresses that a structures of feeling are vividly felt by the persons that actively experience them in the here-and-now:

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships...: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living relating continuity.²⁰²

He adds, "It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt."²⁰³ In this way, a structure of feeling is experienced in the minds and bodies of individuals while shared "through connections in a generation or period."²⁰⁴ Structure of feeling is thus individually yet collectively felt in a coherent manner, experienced both psychologically and physically. Although Williams' notion is overly universalising, at the same time its strength is found in its desire to capture the psychological and

²⁰⁰ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² *Ibid.* 132.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 132-133.

emotional experiences of a group in a specific period of time, in ways that go beyond documented historical (political, economic) events. This notion fits well with Hebdige's whose thrust is anything but universalising, given his focus on the specificity of subcultures. Hebdige's study of the punk scene, however, can be criticised for insufficiently examining the *pleasure* that participants clearly take in listening to the music or dressing up in a spectacular fashion. Clark arguably bridges the gaps found in Williams and Hebdige's theories, managing to find a kind of equilibrium between the documentation of subculture and style, in conjunction with pleasure.

Clark creates this structure of feeling of youth in a variety of ways. At times, he gives us an almost visceral sense of their youthful energy through the use of loud music and rapid editing; other times, he trains the camera on them, allowing the camera to linger on their bodies in a way that give us a physical sensation of the boys physicality by showing us extreme close-ups of his subject's bodies and faces, not yet fully formed and still soft with the last traces of baby fat. In the film's many extended skateboarding scenes, at times shot in grainy video, we watch the boys fall time and time again as they attempt difficult jumps, hear them cursing with pain, see them nursing their injuries only to hobble back again—some quickly making the sign of the cross—to their skateboards (figure 29). At times, Clark simply shows them skateboarding with no musical soundtrack playing; other times, he creates the sense of euphoria they might feel as they skateboard, pushing and shoving each other boisterously down the centre of an empty street, by adding the loud, unintelligibly shouted punk rock songs the boys like. In another sequence, Clark shows the boys horsing around in the playground, spinning at high speed on a carousel and laughing, until one vomits; because the camera rotates along

with the carousel, the viewer is made to feel equally dizzy. In quieter scenes, we watch Jonathan and his girlfriend make out while blowing chewing-gum bubbles (figure 30) and sucking on lollypops, hang out with friends while sprawled on couches, or practice in their punk band. Throughout many of the obviously improvised scenes, it is difficult to understand what they are saying as they tease and interrupt each other. However, this is of little importance as these moments are less about the content of their conversation than they are about its texture and mood: the visual and aural articulation of a specific structure of feeling, not of an entire country as Hebdige rather optimistically would have it, but of a cross-section of a subculture.

Unlike the photographic monograph, the film makes us aware of the marginalisation and racism that these boys experience coming from immigrant Latino backgrounds and living in an economically depressed neighbourhood. *Wassup Rockers* starts on a note of gang violence with the shooting of a young Latino male and throughout the film, they are chased and shot at as they make their way through affluent Beverly Hills. The young group is often shown in conflict with racist policemen (“You don’t belong here”) who see them as threats to society (“I’ve got seven Hispanics on skateboards”). Moreover, given their penchant for punk rock style, a look not favoured by their hip-hop clothed peers, the group is ostracised: as one boy recounts, “They call us rockers and shit. They think we’re rockers cuz we wear our hair long and tight pants and clothes.” We see them being heckled as they brush up against their black peers in their neighbourhood and at school. Continuously misidentified as Mexican, the individual boys are constantly obliged to explain their actual roots: Salvadoran (or “Salvi”) and Guatemalan. (A running gag comes from one boy who mockingly responds, “I’m from

the ghetto,” each time he is asked yet again to identify his origins). Clark suggests their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, showing the bare interiors of their homes, sparsely decorated with a few posters and occasional Catholic religious paraphernalia (a painting of *The Last Supper*, votive candles surrounding a make-shift memorial). In one early scene, he telegraphs the challenges of raising families on a single and insecure income by showing a tired mother come home from a night’s work just in time to wake up her sons for school, after dropping a jumbled wad of cash on the table (we later discover that she is a stripper). Likewise, when the boys decide to go skateboarding in Beverly Hills, Clark makes the geographical socioeconomic divide between the two neighbourhoods strikingly evident as we witness the time and energy it takes for the group to leave their neighbourhood, a trip involving a car, two buses, and numerous confrontations with police officers.

Clark’s emphasis on these youth’s voices and perspectives is evident throughout the film.²⁰⁵ In fact, the film begins with a split-screen shot (placed before the title sequence) featuring Jonathan being interviewed by an off-screen Clark. Jonathan introduces anecdotally his group of friends (Kiko, Eddie, Porky, Spermball), essentially setting the audience up for what the film will then image, a narrative based on the boys’ lives. In fact, the film, particularly the first half, can be said to be the realisation of these stories. At the end of this initial segment, Jonathan asks, “What other stories do you want to hear?” before the film lurches into action. Moreover, many of the interesting moments

²⁰⁵ Given Clark’s decision to privilege improvisation, the screenplay for *Wassup Rockers* was apparently less than 50 pages, much shorter than the average Hollywood screenplay. This marks a difference from *Kids*, Clark’s first foray into cinema and working with young non-actors, which he said that despite its apparently improvised quality, all the lines had been scripted. For *Kids*, Clark insists his actors “had to stick to the script” (quoted in Taubin 19), clarifying that, “There’s improv, but even the improv was suggested. A kid might say it in his own way, but he was fed the line” (quoted in Schrader 79).

in the film come from Clark's strategy to feature the boys recounting stories from their lives—instances of racism or peer pressure, their first sexual experiences—told in their awkward, inarticulate, and meandering ways, within the context of the film. Clark's approach to the making of this film and his emphasis on their personal stories²⁰⁶ can be linked to the *cinéma vérité*'s interest in the (co-authored) narrative as Karl G. Heider observes of one of this movement's most influential practitioners: "One of Jean Rouch's favourite admonitions to ethnographic filmmakers [was] "Tell a story."²⁰⁷

In his introduction to Jean Rouch's *Ciné-ethnography*, Steven Feld enumerates what *cinéma vérité* has come to signify in *praxis*: the use of non-actors in non-scripted, spontaneous situations who are filmed in their usual environments, in conjunction with the employment of available light sources with hand-held cameras and sound equipment. In this way, it makes reference concurrently to "a process, visual aesthetic and technology of cinema."²⁰⁸ Feld explains that what has become, within the popular imagination, a kind of "ideology of authenticity"²⁰⁹ is not quite as cut-and-dry as might be expected. He quotes Jean Rouch, known as the godfather of the *cinéma vérité* movement, who defines it as "designat[ing] not 'pure truth' but the particular truth of the recorded images and sounds—a filmic truth, *ciné-vérité*."²¹⁰ To rephrase Rouch: the *vérité* in question is in fact a cinematic construct. It is interesting to note that Rouch considers himself a spiritual heir to Robert Flaherty, prospector and explorer turned documentary filmmaker. Flaherty is known for his popular silent documentary, *Nanook*

²⁰⁶ In his discussion of his work dating back to *Tulsa*, Clark emphasises his interest in the narrative, stating, "I wanted to be a storyteller, tell a story." (Quoted in Kelley 82).

²⁰⁷ Karl G. Heider, *Ethnographic Film*, revised ed. (1976) (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press 2006) 32.

²⁰⁸ Steven Feld, "Editor's Introduction," Jean Rouch, *Ciné-ethnography*, ed. and transl. Steven Feld (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 7.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ Rouch quoted in Feld 13.

| *of the North* (1922). Made with the close collaboration of its main protagonist, Nanook, who apparently suggested many of the key undertakings featured in the film, this film shows members of an Inuit family carrying out such traditional activities as the construction of an igloo or a polar bear hunt. Flaherty was criticised for staging a romantic reality that did not correspond to the lives of many Inuit at the beginning of the twentieth century and moreover for putting his subjects at risk in order to do so.²¹¹ Despite these criticisms, Jean Rouch praises *Nanook of the North* as an “achievement of the “participating camera,” and its connections to the “staging” of reality.”²¹² Rejecting the ““fly-on-the-wall’ principle of non-intervention”²¹³ of early American *cinéma vérité*, Rouch preferred to utilise the camera as a kind of *agent provocateur*, a probing catalyst for revealing meaning that depended on the context and that was *intersubjective* (that is to say, based on the relationship between the camera/the director and its subject). It is interesting to look at these characteristics of *ciné-vérité*, to dispel the idea that its main objective is to capture a black-and-white version of reality. As can be seen, its provenance shows that it is quite the opposite.

This kind of interest in staging fictions in collaboration with the objects of study is evident in *Wassup Rockers* becomes especially manifest in the latter part of the film, where the tone switches from the feeling of pseudo documentary to that of spoof with strong slapstick elements. Clark places his protagonists in extreme situations that highlight their difference, while emphasising their experiences of racism and ostracism.

²¹¹ At the same time, some have argued that, Flaherty depicted not “a current way of life but one filtered through memories of Nanook and his people” which effectively “reflected their image of their traditional life,” a group’s conception of its cultural identity and history as worthy of study as their actual everyday existence. (Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, 2nd revised ed. (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1993), 45.)

²¹² *Ibid.* 13.

²¹³ *Ibid.* 16.

In this section of *Wassup Rockers*, his protagonists leave their ghetto neighbourhood and go to affluent Beverly Hills where they visit sprawling properties and pool parties, their dress and dark skin making them stand out like exotic creatures within their all-white surroundings. Moreover, they often appear more attractively authentic in comparison to the corrupt white adults embodied by a cast of stereotypes: aggressive policemen, a gay voyeur, pretentious art crowd, and a predatory aging actress with breast implants. They appear naïvely innocent (they go to Beverly Hills first and foremost to skate on a legendary set of steps) and upon arrival, they appear to be guided instinctively solely by their desire to skate and meet girls. And though they do get to skate for a bit and make out with members of the opposite sex, the group is bruised, battered, and even diminished in number by the end of the day: constantly heckled by police for crimes uncertain (one boy is caught and arrested), chased and beat up by well-off white boys for seducing their girlfriends, and even literally hunted down by one resident with a rifle as they run across his property (one is killed). After their adventures in this new milieu, Clark shows them stranded, hiding out in a park with but one desire: to return where they came from (they are saved by an underground network of Latino domestic workers who make sure they return home safely). In ending his film on their wished-for return to the ghetto, Clark appears to want them to return unblemished to their “natural” habitat; their attempted foray outside of their usual surroundings full of adventure but essentially a catastrophe.

“The Artist as Ethnographer” and the Myth of the Artist Outsider

Hal Foster, writing at the height of the 1990s’ identity politics movement in his essay, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” discusses his perception of a major shift in art-making as the end of the twentieth century drew to a close. Writing in response to the

essay, “The Artist as Producer” (1934), in which Walter Benjamin called for artists to create work that went beyond mere aesthetic concerns and to aim rather for social and political change, Foster identifies a new “‘paradigm’ of the artist as ethnographer.” Foster argues that Benjamin’s “artist-as-producer” paradigm remains essentially intact in terms of its resistance to elitist principles in art, art institutions, and society at large, but that “the subject of association has changed: it is the cultural and/or the ethnic other in whose name the committed artist most often struggles.”²¹⁴ Although Foster was not discussing Modernist primitivist artists, much of his analysis could apply to them. The parallels with Modernist avant-gardism are evident, specifically in terms of its veneration of the marginal as a potential for radical change. Discussing this “idealization of otherness,”²¹⁵ Foster writes:

The assumption that this site [of political and artistic transformation] is always *elsewhere*, in the field of the other ... and that this elsewhere, this outside, is the Archimedean point from which the dominant culture will be transformed or at least *subverted*.²¹⁶

Following Foster’s artist-as-ethnographer paradigm, an analogy can be made with Gill Perry’s “cult of ‘the going away’”²¹⁷ found within the Modernist trend for artists to travel to rural or exotic locales in order to find subject matter, or to work under conditions normatively associated with “the essential purity and goodness of ‘primitive’ life, by contrast with the decadences of over-civilized Western societies.”²¹⁸

This embracing of the marginal whether in terms of those living in the lower rungs of urban society (the working class, the economically impoverished, the

²¹⁴ Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: MIT Press, 2001, 4th printing, 1996, 1st ed.), 173.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.* 178.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.* 173.

²¹⁷ Perry 8.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.* 6

uneducated, the *Roma*), the rural (the peasant class), the insane, the non-Western “other” within the contexts of *avant-garde* modernism, postmodernism, and colonialism is seen as an automatic way of positioning oneself both artistically and politically in the camp of anti-establishment and pro-authenticity. In effect, Foster argues that the ethnographer paradigm within the context of *avant-garde* practices past and present is based on what he identifies as the “*realist assumption*: that the other ... is somehow in reality, in truth, not in ideology, because he or she is socially oppressed, politically transformative, and/or materially productive.”²¹⁹ Foster goes on to conclude that this realist assumption is essentially

compounded by a primitivist fantasy: that the other, usually assumed to be of color, has special access to primary psychic and social processes from which the white subject is somehow blocked—a fantasy that is a fundamental to primitivist modernism as the realist assumption is to productivist modernism.²²⁰

In this light, it is interesting to look at Larry Clark’s practice with the objective of understanding how he fits into this ethnographer paradigm, especially given his focus on marginal, subcultural groups, in tandem with his “anthropological” approach (with its links to *cinéma vérité*) to this subject matter. This anthropological interest in Jonathan and his friends is manifest immediately with a description of their neighbourhood. In the director’s commentary for the DVD package of *Wassup Rockers*, Clark states that South Central in Los Angeles is a ghetto where “no white people go.” In this way, his discourse has roots in the Modernist traditions of “the cult of the going away” or the *flâneur*, one that offers him the possibility of working “outside of these perceived limitations and

²¹⁹ Foster 174.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

controls of the Establishment.”²²¹ Immediately identifying the socio-geographical identity of this ghetto as an enclave for the ethnic communities of blacks and Latinos, Clark also makes it clear that these boundaries—confirmations of their *otherness* and therefore *more real*—only make the community more interesting for him. In other words: their marginalised ethnic and socioeconomic status as Latinos, immigrants, and ghetto kids, all make them objects of desire in his eyes. Moreover, we are to respect Clark for crossing these boundaries, for entering the realm of the real, an act that is perceived as positive within the paradigm of the artist as ethnographer.

In *Wassup Rockers*, Clark appears committed in his attempts to capture a sense of his subjects’ style and lifestyles. However it would be difficult to call his practice an effort to empower these boys. For at the same time, this desire to incorporate the so-called other into his work often functions as a kind of shortcut to positioning himself as outsider, rather than any kind of sustained interest in mediating possibilities for his subjects’ self-representation. By drawing on youth, essentially a signifier incarnate of authenticity, he holds onto the coveted position of artist outsider. Youth, especially marginal or delinquent youth, offers Clark what he no longer has: as aging artist with an established place in the Western art and film canon, he needs them in order to maintain his claims as one whose work remains as “authentic” as his first project, *Tulsa*, and who refuses to be co-opted by the art world no matter how successful his career.²²² His works

²²¹ Perry 10.

²²² In the accompanying interview for a fashion shoot that he photographs for *Arena+Homme*, Clark insists, apparently without irony, on locating himself as a marginal in the art and film milieus: “I’ve never cared about money. If I did I’d have sold out and done fashion campaigns.” (quoted in Clark and Heath).

can be read thus as a kind of transcript of his own personal claims to being an authority on youth and all its “simultaneously transgressive and revered”²²³ attributes.²²⁴

²²³ Acland 19.

²²⁴ It is interesting to note in that in the media coverage of the film, *Wassup Rockers*, though Clark is pictured extensively with its young protagonists in fashion spreads and features on the film, it is always only he who is interviewed; in this way, he is represented as a kind of (self-appointed) spokesperson for his teenage subjects, if not ambassador for all youth.

Chapter 3

He's Gotta Have It: Depictions of Hyper-Masculinity and Male Sexuality

As previously mentioned, Larry Clark's photographs and films are discernibly characterised by their ethnographic perspectives on male youth. The identity of the group may vary. However, the overarching focus of Clark's study of the young male remains consistent: namely, sex and sexuality, often in tandem with such factors as drugs, disease, and death. Within this dark equation, male youth are usually defined by a decadent sexuality. Clark's young protagonists are sexualised both as desired objects and debauched subjects whose masculinity at times appears predicated on a hypersexualised performativity, whether implied or manifest. In justifying this universalising vision of depraved male youth, Clark has consistently insisted that he is simply imaging an existing reality (to which few have privileged access) and responding to the lack of representation on subject matter (that few, if any, are willing to touch).

Building loosely on Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble*, this chapter will focus on Clark's photographic and filmic representations of masculinity and male sexuality. While making links between his representations of male youth with primitivist perspectives, I examine how masculine identity and male sexuality plays out in *Tulsa*, *Teenage Lust*, and *Kids*.²²⁵ I pose the question as to whether Clark's sexualised images deconstruct or merely substantiate dominant, essentialist notions of masculinity. Moreover, I explore how Clark's discourse about his photographic and film

²²⁵ I use *Tulsa* and *Teenage Lust* as key case studies, as they first established the simple yet salacious template of savage youth that would eventually mark his *oeuvre*. I examine *Kids* as an important landmark in Clark's career, marking his first foray into cinema and the fiction genre, but more importantly as a film that still manages to shock in its thesis that teenage males must have sex at all costs, even if this implies their eventual demise.

practice—wavering between viewpoints of autobiography and ethnography—conforms to Michel Foucault’s theory of the repression hypothesis as outlined in *The History of Sexuality*. Finally, I investigate how his representations of male sexuality and the masculine gender have, often with Clark’s compliance, been appropriated and absorbed by mainstream visual culture (namely fashion and advertising), and commoditised as an aesthetic of sexualised male youth.

As we shall see, many of Clark’s assumptions concerning male sexuality and youth identity, in conjunction with his own role in depicting these topics, have much in common with the primitivist perspectives that pervade ethnographic and Modernist *avant-garde* practices. In Marianna Torgovnic’s discussion of the impact of psychology on the development of ethnography, she writes, “Freud’s explanation of the human psyche in terms of sexuality undergirded their endeavors and influenced the structure of many ethnographic inquiries at this stage of the discipline’s development.”²²⁶ If sexuality was at the very backbone of Freudian notions of human development, socialisation, and civilisation, ethnography likewise made it one of its primary points of study. By examining so-called primitive societies through the lens of Freudian-influenced thought, early ethnographers came to universalising conclusions regarding supposedly unruly ‘savage’ sexuality and the importance of its suppression as a precondition for civilisation. Modernist artists concurred with these essentialising visions of non-Western sexuality, though they correlated the sexual liberty believed to be inherent to “primitive” ways of life with Western bohemian, anti-*bourgeois* attitudes.

²²⁶ Torgovnick 6.

Within this perspective therefore, they idealised this supposed wild sexuality both as an articulation of and inspiration for countercultural rebellion.²²⁷

Days of Youth: *Tulsa*

Clark's ethnographic evocation of sexuality as *the* defining characteristic of masculinity and youth is suggested in the way the male body is pictured from the very first pages of *Tulsa*. The book opens with two photographs, each featuring a shirtless young man, identified respectively as David Roper (figure 31) and Billy Mann (figure 32). Their slim, hairless torsos make them appear younger than their twenty years (assuming that they are around Clark's age of the time these photographs were taken, i.e. 1963).²²⁸ In some of the subsequent shots, they are seen in buttoned-up shirts; here, they are bare-chested. Through his focus on the male torso here, Clark arguably places his friends within a history of Western aesthetics of the male nude—their white as yet unblemished skin (apart from the occasional tattoo) and lean, muscular frames resembling Early Classical Greek marble statuary of the male figure, and dynamic, asymmetrical postures similar to those favoured by Polykleitos, most famously in his canonic *Spear Bearer* (c. 450-440 BC) (figure 33), though here the activities are more in the realm of the less strenuous: stretching, grooming (figures 11 & 34).

At the same time, because they are shot alone and/or outdoors in each of the shots, they seem existentially solitary. As Richard Dyer writes in his essay, "The White Man's Muscles," "A naked body is a vulnerable body ... in the most fundamental sense—the

²²⁷ Price 47.

²²⁸ Dr. Martha Langford has suggested that the adolescent appearance of their bodies may be due to the fact that amphetamines keep people thin. (Written feedback on my thesis, May 2008).

bare body has no protection from the elements—but also in a social sense. Clothes are bearers of prestige, notably of wealth, status and class.”²²⁹ In these two introductory images, Clark creates a romantic vision of youth as the incarnation of a kind of pure, pre-civilised state, a physicality that is nonetheless marked by a kind of fragility or defencelessness, one in which their very youth is their Achilles heel. If bare skin is first associated in these opening images with a youthful innocence and beauty, the latter images show body parts exposed expressly for the injection of drugs or for sexual activity; in a sense, to penetrate or be penetrated.

Clark’s depiction of the youthful male body throughout *Tulsa*, despite his obvious idealisation of its smooth, hard musculature, is always therefore essentially at risk, vulnerable. This is crystallised in the last photograph of Billy Mann to be found in the book (figure 35) in which Mann is shirtless holding a gun, under which can be found the caption “dead 1970,” which is preceded by a blank white page except for the printed text, “death is more perfect than life.” This photograph, indicating as much the end of an era as it does a life marks Clark’s nostalgic identification with and fetishist appreciation for the brief physical beauty of male youth, one that he associates with a time when drug use was still a pleasurable activity. In the book’s later photographs, Clark shows us the degeneration of male bodies as their drug use becomes addiction that ravages their lives and bodies: his naked or half-dressed subjects now appear unkempt and unclean, their once smooth bodies now hairy, their once firm flesh somewhat sagging (figure 36). In this way, *Tulsa* makes manifest the very binary, contradictory quality of primitivism

²²⁹ Richard Dyer, “The White Man’s Muscles,” *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, eds. Rachel Adams and David Savran (Malden, Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 262-3.

identified by Torgovnick as oscillating between “nightmare or pleasant dream.”²³⁰ Male youth in this universe begins with a fully embraced hedonism and ends with the deterioration of pleasure as youth fades. Clark does not conclude on this note of bodily decline however. Rather he closes *Tulsa* on an image of a young man (a character who is part of a generation that is clearly no longer Clark’s) shooting up as if to show the inevitable fate of youth (figure 17). In this way, this subculture’s specific “rite of passage” for male youth, is abstracted as a cyclical journey from innocence to experience, from beauty to its deterioration, only to begin again: a destiny that all must face. At the same time, in so doing, Clark’s creates a universalising, almost mythical version of male youth—youth that somehow persists or regenerates despite the passing of time—recalling what Sally Price terms the “ethnographic present,” an a-historicising process in which “individuals and whole generations [are universalised] into a composite figure alleged to represent his fellows past and present.”²³¹

Clark’s personal engagement with his subject matter in tandem with his desire to photographically render the drug-infused reality of these boys *and* “catch them when the light is right”²³² further illustrates primitivism’s binarity. Many of the early portraits in the book are shot in a style rooted in Modernist photography’s emphasis on light and composition. Clark employs various formal strategies²³³ to highlight the effects of drug use while creating aesthetically interesting images—for instance, the use of mirrors and shattered glass (figure 36) that result in fragmented portraits of the young men or severe

²³⁰ Torgovnick 246.

²³¹ Price 57.

²³² Clark quoted in Kelley 83.

²³³ Clark’s interest in the formal composition of his photographs is revealed in his interview with Kelley; he says: “I was able to get that quality when it was actually happening, that quality of looking set up.” (Ibid.)

black-and-white contrasts that generate a strong sense of drama. Many of the images despite their subject matter visually quote from Catholic iconography wherein the body is highly aestheticised and its physical suffering supremely venerated: the muscled, highly veined arm of a man framed by a halo of light; the exposed neck of a young man bent over, hands clutching his head as if in deep prayer or pain; an emaciated man on a bed (figure 37), face twisted in agony, thigh marked by a circle of blood from a gunshot; a close-up of a bleeding wrist like a *stigmata*, suggesting Christ's crucifixion (figure 38). On the one hand, Clark appears to be presenting here images of young men whose drug use surely contradicts the mainstream model of the American male who contributes to society. Yet, on the other, the ways in which he aestheticises his subjects' bodies and their activities through skilful photographic techniques and the creation of imagery evoking the Western art historical canon—both spiritual and secular—not only lends a certain *gravitas* to the activities of these men but also ultimately undermines the potentially subversive impact of the countercultural content.²³⁴ Moreover, in these allusions to a recognisable iconography of the male within Western art history (with its high-art pedigree), Clark certainly renders his subject matter more palatable than might normally be deemed shocking or unacceptable by some viewers.

Clark images of masculinity appears echo not only the Western art canon but equally culls images of hyper-masculinity from popular film culture, one that is rooted in a fascination with the male body and specifically deviant male youth. His male subjects at times give off a moody, bad-boy aura that recall the iconic James Dean figure of the

²³⁴ In the *Flash Art* interview, Clark brags about his approach as a photographer: "Many photographers and photojournalists are great at grabbing the picture ... but they don't care what the people look like. ... I could do all that plus get the person to look like I would like them to look, or how they would like to look." (Quoted in Kelley 82-3). He continues: "I like to my work to look sexy and it does look sexy." (Quoted in Kelley 85).

tortured, loner “boy-man”: a handsome young man with a dishevelled shock of hair smoking in bed with a baby (figure 39), another brushing back his hair into a high pompadour in front of a mirror (figure 34), Billy Mann frowning under tousled hair as he drives (figure 32). The fact that they do not appear aware of the camera further establishes the strong cinematic feeling of some of these portraits. In the cover image of *Tulsa* (figure 35) in which Billy Mann²³⁵ sits shirtless on a clean white bed, holding an upheld gun, Clark reproduces the iconic image of the male outlaw. This adulation of the outlaw is again reiterated in the film clip series located in the middle of the book featuring men wearing black sunglasses, brandishing guns, flexing arm muscles, inserting needles (as women watch) (figure 40). They resemble most the anti-heroes of gangster films. These stylised images stand out from the others as it is clear that they are really just young men striking tough guy poses; it is not surprising then that Clark has acknowledged the influence of 1950s B-movies on his early photography.²³⁶ This clearly ‘fictionalised’ section, with its explicitly B-movie/*film-noir* overtones, colours our perception of these young men’s drug use and lifestyle, offering up a kind of mythical touchstone of how marginalised masculinity is glamorised in the movies. Moreover, the viewer gains insight into how Clark has been influenced by this popular visual culture of masculinity, and his own participation—be it unconscious or conscious—in that myth-making process.

In his essay, “Larry Clark: Outlaw Artist,” Philip Monk describes the seduction of the very potent male paradigm of the outlaw in American culture as follows: “The outlaw, whether Western gunslinger or Prohibition gangster, is one of the defining myths of

²³⁵ In a case of art intersecting neatly with life, note the hypermasculinity of the homonymic surname in conjunction with a first name that brings to mind the infamous cowboy outlaw, Billy the Kid.

²³⁶ Quoted in Kelley 82.

American culture. ... [L]arger than life, they act out forbidden desires we cannot fulfil in our daily lives.”²³⁷ Monk goes on to describe the outlaw within popular American iconography as “deriv[ing] his mythic power from that position on the border between inside and outside.”²³⁸ It is interesting to note that despite his insight regarding the seduction of the myth of the deviant outsider, Monk nonetheless makes ample reference himself to Clark’s illegal activities in his essay as a way of framing and validating *Tulsa* as coming from a place of truth and authenticity. John Leland emphasises the *primitivist* appeal of outlaw figures in American history, describing them as incarnating “the mythologies of the American Renaissance: the lives of unfettered freedom and pleasure, of rebellion and primitive violence.”²³⁹ José Estaban Muñoz offers a more critical view of Clark’s commitment to what Monk calls the “code of the outlaw,”²⁴⁰ suggesting that Clark’s attraction to the “tough guy” mythology lies in the fact that it is rooted in “a character who existed before the advent of rights [feminist, queer, etc.] discourse.”²⁴¹ Certainly, Clark, as a figure in the art world, seems to act out the role of the outlaw to a T; likewise for his fellow heroin users but as the anti-heroes of *Tulsa*. And though Clark was heavily involved in various criminal activities and did prison time during the time span covered by *Tulsa* and later *Teenage Lust*, he is evidently not above reiterating the romantic myth of the male outlaw for the camera, both in terms of his subject matter and in speaking of his own career path. *Teenage Lust*, for instance, ends with a long rant by Clark in which he details his difficult childhood and long-term involvement with drugs

²³⁷ Monk 15.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ John Leland, *Hip: The History* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 224.

²⁴⁰ Monk 15.

²⁴¹ José Estaban Muñoz, “Rough Boy Trade,” *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, ed. Deborah Bright (London and NY: Routledge 1998), 170.

and crime, and in interviews right up to the present, he continues to use this term ‘outlaw’ in reference to his past.²⁴²

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler proposes a definition of gender that is, to all intents and purposes, “*performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.”²⁴³ That is to say, gender is not the result of some essential self; rather it is “a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies.”²⁴⁴ Here, Butler champions a definition of gender which goes against the idea of a *natural* essence that is the result of one’s sex; in other words, a person’s sexual organs do not necessarily tell us what gender will be taken on, nor how that gender will be played out on the body. Butler uses the example of drag, not as a way of differentiating between the supposed existence of an authentic or false masculinity, but in order to show how gender functions trilaterally, namely on the levels of “anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance.”²⁴⁵ Moreover, she explains: “*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.*”²⁴⁶ Revisiting her ideas on gender in a later essay, Butler emphasises gender’s *imitativity*, writing:

If one considers that gender is acquired that it is assumed in relation to ideals that are never quite inhabited by anyone, their femininity is an ideal which everyone always and only “imitates.” It follows then collectively imitated ideals

²⁴² See Sean O’Hagan, “The kids stay in the picture,” *The Guardian* (February 17, 2008). <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/art/photography/story/0,,2256421,00.html> (accessed Feb. 17, 2008).

²⁴³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990; New York and London: Routledge Classics, 2006), 185.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 186.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 187.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

of gender become the norm. Thus, drag imitates the imitative structure of gender, revealing gender itself as an imitation.”²⁴⁷

Within Butler’s radical redefinition of gender, masculinities are potentially multiple in their possibilities, possibilities that are limited giving the normative restrictions existent in mainstream society.

What images of masculine performativity does Clark articulate in *Tulsa*? Borrowing from powerful paradigms of masculinity, both past and present, he makes reference to a wide array of images of masculinity, ranging from the Western canon as well as American popular culture—from the idealised males of Classical Greek sculpture and suffering Christ figures in the New Testament to the equally venerated anti-heroes of films and the figure of the outlaw in the popular imagination—in order to create his own very recognisable visual iconography of the young male. In this way, despite the diversity of the imagery informing his personal iconography, Clark’s aestheticisation of these marginalised males, in conjunction with his focus on their drug use and participation in criminal or violent activities, remains consistent. Whether making links between drug use and spiritual suffering, or the attitudes of petty criminals with the hipness of the anti-heroes of American films however, Clark unfortunately never really goes beyond these superficial surface comparisons. Moreover, within his universalising narrative, it matters little whether he references Bible or B-movie, for in the end, these wide-ranging stylistic inflections merely confirm the coherence of his overarching vision of young males whose inevitable destiny is to be drawn into a cycle of corporeal corruption and deterioration. In this way, their unsuppressed or uncontrolled “primitive

²⁴⁷ Judith Butler, “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification,” *Constructing Masculinity*, eds. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, Simon Watson (New York, London: Routledge, 1995), 32.

drives' that represent the dark side of human nature"²⁴⁸ serve to bring about their downfall, one that is in a sense *required* within Clark's "better-to-burn-out-than-to-fade-away"²⁴⁹ view of destructive youth.²⁵⁰

Smells like Teen Spirit: *Teenage Lust*

Though Clark has continued to focus on youth and sexuality since *Tulsa*, his work can be perceived differently given that he no longer shares the age and background of his subjects. Unlike *Tulsa* in which Clark photographed his peers, that is to say, friends and fellow participants of the local drug scene of his hometown, his work has since been marked by an ever increasing *de facto* gap between himself and his subjects, despite his claims to the contrary and refusal to fully address these issues. In a brief statement featured amongst the photographs of *Teenage Lust* (1983), Clark writes: "since i became a photographer I always wanted to turn back the years. ... in 1972 and 1973 the kid brothers in the neighbourhood took me with them in their teen lust scene. it took me back." Here he suggests that he nostalgically revisits, *via* the younger generation, what he once vividly experienced himself. However, in a later *Flash Art* interview, Clark suggests that, with *Teenage Lust*, he was able to see and live what he had never really known previously and that had essentially missed out on his teenager years, a period with

²⁴⁸ Price 47.

²⁴⁹ Line from the song, "Hey Hey, My My (Out of the Blue)," by Neil Young from his 1979 album *Rust Never Sleeps*, recorded with Crazy Horse. It would be infamously quoted by the grunge rock musician, Kurt Cobain (1967–1994), in his suicide note.

²⁵⁰ Without suggesting that Clark is in any way responsible, it is nonetheless interesting to note that at least two of the actors featured in his films have died before the age of 30: *Kids*' Justin Pierce (1975-2000) committed suicide, while *Bully*'s leading actor, Brad Renfro (1982-2008), died of a drug overdose. These cases, unfortunately, correspond a little too neatly with Clark's vision of young males.

which he strongly identifies with despite or perhaps *because* of this lack: “A lot of those pictures are about me trying to be a teenager, to validate that time for me, which I felt I didn’t have. ... I always wanted to be the people I photographed and I think using these peoples is like this perfect childhood.”²⁵¹ When asked to clarify, Clark says that he didn’t go through puberty until the age of sixteen and so didn’t have the sexual experiences his friends did at an earlier age: “When I started tenth grade I would have liked to have gone back and start the seventh grade. Then I would have started out on an equal footing with the other guys.”²⁵²

Whatever version one chooses to believe, what remains constant in Clark’s interviews right up to the present appears to be his adulation for teen experience of sex, his apparent yearning to recapture lost youth, and what the screenplay writer/director, Paul Schrader, describes as his “intentional desire to be part of the story.”²⁵³ As Clark states in the interview with Schrader, “I’ve never been a distant observer, it’s always been autobiographical.”²⁵⁴ In this way, he openly appropriates from the lives of his youthful subjects, making their experiences part of his own personal history in some way. It follows then that Clark could subtitle *Teenage Lust* with the words “An Autobiography by Larry Clark,” scrawled in his handwriting, even as the book includes multiple images of teens having sex, mostly friends’ younger brothers with their girlfriends but also a series of hustlers in New York City, in conjunction with more personal photographic material: family snapshots, etc. Clark’s identification of *Teenage Lust* as autobiography

²⁵¹ Quoted in Kelley 84. Incidentally, *Perfect Childhood* would later become the title of a photographic series by Clark; published in 1992, it features images of teenage criminals and models.

²⁵² Quoted in Kelley 85.

²⁵³ Schrader 76.

²⁵⁴ Quoted in Schrader 76.

fits into Solomon-Godeau's aforementioned notion of the "confessional mode," in which the photographer, both in his work and his discourse surrounding his work, insists on the personal engagement with his subject matter; in this way, his photographic practice is seen as an extension of his life.²⁵⁵ Functioning within the confessional mode, *Teenage Lust* features many photographs of Clark as well as documents detailing his criminal activities (newspaper articles announcing his role in an armed robbery, a court statement detailing his participation in an "assault and batter with a deadly weapon with intent to kill"), terminating with a long rant giving details about his family and his life, one that is marked by prison time, drug use, and so forth. At the same time, Clark extends this confessional mode to appropriate those experiences of youth that would not normally be defined as his or to claim them as his own. *Teenage Lust* is in a sense evidence of Clark's *flâneur* approach to his subject matter: sometime participant, sometime observer, he finds and captures youth in remote rural or degenerate urban settings, in his search for their perceived vivacity, spontaneity, and authenticity.

One image in particular vividly marks Clark's desire to have his life intersect or overlap with the male teenager's. Captioned "Self portrait with teenagers," the photograph features a drenched and naked, long-haired Clark in a waterfall with water up to his knees, flanked by two dark-skinned teenagers, also naked (figure 41). The two boys seem to be energetically enjoying themselves: one playfully dashes water onto Clark while the other claps his hands in laughing amusement. Clark for his part looks intently toward the camera. It appears to be an all natural setting at first, but there is also a brick wall and seating constructed around the fountain of water. Clark's vision of teenagers

²⁵⁵ Solomon-Godeau 52.

here is clearly linked with Romantic notions of youth; his desire to have access to their youthful vigour and visceral enjoyment of life is equally evident. At the same time, Clark's very aware gaze towards the camera, in addition to the juxtaposition of various opposing elements—man-made/natural, concrete/fluid, light skin/dark skin—parallel not only to what Liss has called the paradoxical “alienation and attraction”²⁵⁶ of the ethnographer to his subjects, but also the awkward position of juggling the roles of both observer and participant. The ethnographic overtones of this photograph are augmented forcefully by the fact that the boys are not white. Furthermore, Clark's decision to title this photograph a self portrait, situates this work within the primitivist tradition of the artist who desires to live on the so-called margins of society (in this case: a semi-natural setting) as a way of finding authenticity, both artistic and personal - Gauguin being the quintessential case in point.

It is equally interesting to consider this photograph in relationship to Clark's own performativity, as a male and specifically as a male artist. In their article, “Autofictions, or Elective Identities,” Olivier Asselin and Johanne Lamoureux make reference to Foucault's notion of the “arts of existence” described as “those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves, to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic stylistic criteria.”²⁵⁷ This photograph illustrates Clark's conflation of his life and photography, what Asselin and Lamoureux would identify as the “autofiction” that Clark articulates both in his art practice—spending time with teenagers and photographing them as a way of appropriating their experiences into his own life story—and in his

²⁵⁶ Liss 128.

²⁵⁷ Olivier Asselin and Johanne Lamoureux, “Autofictions, or Elective Identities,” *Parachute* 105 (2002): 12.

surrounding discourse. One of his reoccurring claims in interviews, for instance, is that he is able to effortlessly transform himself into his young subjects or at least have access to their reality; in discussing the making of *Kids*, he asserts: “I became one of the guys”²⁵⁸ and “They trusted me, and I was the only one they listened to.”²⁵⁹ This active fusing of biography and the artist’s work, either by the artist or his public, is not really such a new trend however. As Catherine M. Sousloff persuasively argues in *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept*, this confusing of the two has shaped the Western myth of male artist since the Renaissance, a phenomenon that she describes as the “commodification (and/or fetichization) of the artist in the form of the object.”²⁶⁰ “Self portrait with teenagers” works strategically; because we are familiar with Clark’s lifestyle (mythologised *ad infinitum* in *Teenage Lust*’s closing text), this image becomes proof of his ability to live and make art on the margins, as well as his special ability (or so he tell us) to access youth groups with ease.

In discussing his art practice, Clark insists he just wants to be a teenager, not to sleep with them. In response to one interviewer’s nervous question, “So the object of desire is to be the kids, not to have them,” Clark responds, “Right, it’s to be them.”²⁶¹ The point of this thesis is not to confirm or deny his innocence. Rather, I ask what versions of youth does he propose and what are their implications? In discussing the paradigm of the primitive, Torgovnick writes, “They exist for us in a cherished state of dichotomies: by turns gentle, in tune with nature, paradisaal, ideal—or violent, in need of

²⁵⁸ Lynn Hirschberg, “What’s the Matter with Kids Today?” *New York Magazine* issue 23 (June 5, 1995), 38.

²⁵⁹ Quoted in Van Sant 45.

²⁶⁰ Catherine M. Sousloff, *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 144.

²⁶¹ Quoted in Kelley 85

control; what we should emulate or, alternately, what we should fear; noble savages or cannibals.”²⁶² Likewise in *Teenage Lust*, the depictions of teenagers can be roughly placed into two oppositional categories: idyllically romanticised or darkly sexualised. This first category is similar to the representation of the boys in the just discussed “Self portrait with teenagers” (though Clark is usually not necessarily pictured with them). This celebratory perspective of teenagers is best exemplified by a series of images of boys and girls frolicking naked and covered in clay in spectacular desert settings. These photographs do not really differentiate between the two sexes, but rather show youth like a tribe of prehistoric humans, blithely living in nature.²⁶³ Clark paints a picture of youths who take an unselfconscious pleasure in their bodies, seemingly at one with their natural surroundings.

The second category features more sexually explicit shots but unlike the exuberant energy of the previous photographs, they have an almost theatrical, stilted air to them, resembling at times static *tableaux*. They have an over-determined even bizarrely pedagogical quality, as if Clark is intent on proving that all young males really are slaves to violent and primal sexual urges. Moreover, he obviously wants to shock the viewer both in terms of his choice of content and accompanying titles. Here, males emphatically play out roles of domination over women while the latter embody little more than vulnerability in the face of male violence. In *Brother and Sister* for example, a young woman, whose face cannot be seen, lies naked, neatly tied up with rope like a corpse; a naked boy whose face is also covered by his long hair holds her down with one hand over one of her breasts, while with the other hand, he holds a gun pointed towards

²⁶² Torgovnick 3.

²⁶³ The photographer Ryan McGinley has produced similar photographs picturing naked men and women frolicking in nature; the most recent series is entitled *I Know Where the Summer Goes* (2008)

her in a position that mirrors his erection (figure 42). Another with the caption, “They met a girl on acid in Bryant park at 6 am and took her home...,” shows a girl, naked and flat on her back, her legs stiffly spread wide as if like a doll,²⁶⁴ covered by the body of one young man, hat still on, while another waits his turn, erection ready (figure 43). These images emphasise a hyper-macho performativity illustrating uncritical articulations of misogyny and violence. These photographs are especially offensive, and the viewer cannot help but pose questions about Clark’s ethical position in his role of photographer. In discussion of such works however, Clark holds that his only moral responsibility is to capture reality as is and that his obligation is to take photographs as a way of recording the facts: “‘Some people seem to think I’m some kind of pervert because I film and photograph kids,’ he says, ‘but just look at the work. It’s [*sic*] real situations. It’s about real life. Teenagers have sex, they smoke weed.’”²⁶⁵ From his hardly nuanced perspective, to criticise such representations is a pressing matter of censorship and its associated stakes; he thus refuses any personal responsibility, preferring to accuse critical viewers—be they conservative or more liberal-minded—of puritanical prudery or a McCarthyesque viewpoint on freedom of expression. I will examine Clark’s rather predictable rhetoric arising from concerns about his own censorship later in this chapter, through the lens of Foucault’s concept of the repression hypothesis.

In these overtly sexual images, Clark sets up a relationship of voyeurism where the viewer, alongside him, can observe youth on display as sex objects and little else. In

²⁶⁴ This image is evoked in one of the final scenes of *Kids* in which a girl is raped by an acquaintance at a party, a scene that is framed by her bobbing widespread legs; Clark ups the shock value by stressing her purity through her wearing of clean white ankle socks.

²⁶⁵ Quoted in O’Hagan (accessed Feb. 17, 2008).

one example, a photograph titled, *Runaway, California*,²⁶⁶ features a naked teenage boy, lying on a mattress placed directly on the floor (figure 44). The title suggests the subject's vulnerability; however, his gaze toward the camera is unwavering, and his position (his arm supporting his head allows for his body to be assertively shown off) unapologetically carnal.²⁶⁷ The hustler series that conclude the book functions similarly: featured are male prostitutes whose overtly sexual expressions and poses (some with exposed erections protruding from their pants) display their skills at playing the role of active seducer when sexually propositioning potential clients (figure 45). This series is especially interesting in that it shows young men acting out within the public arena a hyperbolic masculinity—rooted in an equally exaggerated version of sexuality—that is emphatically performative, a performance that is played out with the objective of attracting male and/or female customers. This gender performativity, as Judith Butler explains, is manifested on the body's exterior and “*performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs.”²⁶⁸ The problem is that Clark appears to take this masculine performativity at face value, as an unequivocal truth about the essence of teen sexuality (hence his universalising book's title). Indeed, by ending *Teenage Lust* with the hustler images, Clark sets up a kind of normalising arc of inevitability that seems to confirm the

²⁶⁶ Note that Clark does not identify the runaway by name; in this way, the latter remains anonymous, more easily fitting into his universalising iconography of male youth.

²⁶⁷ It is interesting to note how early in his career that Clark established a certain visual repertoire of poses of the male figure; this particular pose of boy lying down, torso bare, arm behind head, looking up at the viewer, is found again in Clark's recent exhibition, *Los Angeles, 2004-2006* (2007). This position harks back to depictions of the female nude lounging with the breasts or buttocks on display in Western erotic imagery, whether in the European painting tradition (Edouard Manet's *Olympia*, 1863 is one canonic example) or pornographic magazines. I do not wish to deny the erotic pleasure that such images may afford the viewer; however, by simply replacing the female figure with that of the male, is Clark actually pushing gender boundaries, or merely transferring this objectification of the female onto the male subject?

²⁶⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185.

hypersexuality of young men (from runaways to prostitutes) as primeval or predatory, whether they do it for money or for free in the private or public sphere.

Even as Clark appears to want to create a kind of autobiography through his sexualised depictions of teens in *Teenage Lust*, he often cites his voyeurism, though within the more socially acceptable guise of journalistic curiosity or research as justification for his sexual subject matter. In a magazine interview from 2002, Clark discusses one photograph from *Teenage Lust*, illustrating this attitude: “I wanted to be there and I wanted to photograph it. It was his first blow job and it’s something that happens to all of us. And I hadn’t ever seen a photo of someone’s first blow job. I wanted to photograph things I hadn’t seen before.”²⁶⁹ ²⁷⁰ In another article, Clark is quoted as saying about *Teenage Lust*, “I’m just trying to show things the way they are.”²⁷¹ This perspective is embodied by a surprisingly self-reflexive photograph featured in *Teenage Lust* in which Clark shows a cluster of cut-outs of his photographs pinned to a wall creating an orgiastic frenzy of teens in various sexual positions and acts. Within this messy montage (which in itself resembles a teenager’s bedroom walls) of naked bodies, Clark inserts himself as observer of the sexual activities of these teens by means of a picture of himself in the corner, with his shoulders and hands raised upwards almost comically, in an attitude that could perhaps be read as, “Hey, don’t blame the

²⁶⁹ Larry Clark and Ashley Heath, “Conversation on Thompson Street,” *Arena Homme* issue 18 (Autumn/Winter 2002-2003) [no page number].

²⁷⁰ Clark’s desire to film the real “first” experiences of youth that he as not as yet seen depicted, arguably attempts to counter the pornographic industry’s appropriation of depicting actors in scenes of graphic sexual activity (previously only found in such underground works as Andy Warhol’s *Blow Job* (1963). As Juan A. Suárez explains, hard core imagery was no longer the exclusive (and transgressive) domain of the *avant-garde* as their “open depictions of sexuality were outdone in the late 1960s by commercial pornography.” (Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 260.)

²⁷¹ Hirschberg 37.

messenger!” The crude cut-and-paste aesthetic at the same time reveals his “out-of-placeness” in this scenario.

Clark sets himself up thus as a teller of truth about teenagers, a truth about their sexuality that is commonly concealed in society and therefore needs to be shown. In this way, his images fit into recent photographic representations of what the art historian, Anne Higonnet, describes as “Knowing children,” who are “far from being psychically or sexually innocent”²⁷² and have replaced the purity associated with the young within Romanticism. She warns us however that, “Despite photography’s realism, ... images of Knowing children are no intrinsically better or more honest ... or more real than any definition of childhood”²⁷³; rather, she suggests that this is merely the more current, collectively accepted viewpoint, much like previous notions of innocent, pre-sexual children. This is important to remember keep in mind *vis-à-vis* Clark’s perception of himself as educator who informs the public about the sexual reality of male youth everywhere.

Les enfants terribles: Kids

Kids was highly praised and criticised for its controversial representations of teenage sexuality, this time in the midst of the AIDS pandemic that developed in the mid-1990s. Clark made the film after a prolonged research period during which he photographed a group of young skaters that he met in New York City; apparently, it was necessary to learn to skateboard himself in order to keep up with young subjects.

²⁷² Higonnet 12.

²⁷³ *Ibid.* 209.

Featuring a cast of young non-professional actors (playing their actual ages or close to their ages) and filmed from a screenplay by a nineteen-year-old Harmony Korine (commissioned by Clark and based on an idea—“a skateboarder whose passion is to seduce virgins”²⁷⁴—that he gave Korine), *Kids* portrays a day in the life of a group of teenagers hanging out, partying, and having unprotected sex in New York City. Two main narratives emerge from this backdrop: a) Tully, the young teenage male protagonist who prefers to have sex with virgin girls as a way of not catching any viruses, and how he seduces them and b) Jenny, a young teenage female who has just found out that she is HIV-positive; knowing that Tully is the source, given the fact that he was her only sexual partner, she sets out to find him to tell him.

The cinematic medium appears to serve Clark’s interest in representing teenage sexuality more successfully than photography. His depiction of teenage sex and the ways it is discussed in *Kids* has none of the aforementioned stilted feeling of some of the images present in *Teenage Lust*. Although the film does include a narrative structure that arguably parallels melodrama, it does not feel driven by its story line. The film opens on a bedroom decorated with teddy bears and flowered linens where a teenage boy and girl dressed in only their underwear kiss for very long time (figure 46). The camera is held extremely close to the action, creating a heightened sense of the characters’ physicality. The viewer is privy to a very close perception of their pores and the sweat on their flushed skin. There is no musical score and so the spectator is extra aware of their breathing and the sounds they make as they shift from kissing to having sex.

²⁷⁴ Lynn Hirschberg, “What’s the Matter with Kids Today,” *New York Magazine* issue 23 (June 5, 1995), 38.

In another sequence, which takes place at a party, Clark lets the camera travel lingeringly over the brown skin of shirtless boys, both adolescent and the prepubescent, who are squeezed together on a couch sharing a joint (figure 47). They are giggling and talking, but the viewer hardly notes what they are saying (in any case it is mumbled and incoherent); what emerges as important once again is the viewer's feeling of almost being there, of learning alongside these young boys rituals of manhood; in this case, smoking marijuana. This homosociality is recurrent in *Kids* at times with strong elements of homoeroticism.²⁷⁵ In another, Clark shows his two main male protagonists standing in front of a window; bathed in a golden light, the shirtless boys take turns spraying down each other's muscled torsos with a spray bottle as respite from the sticky humidity of summer in apartments without air conditioning in New York City, Clark uses film here aurally and texturally, combining image and sound, in a way that makes it difficult for the viewer to keep a distance.

In her book, *The Skin of Film*, Laura U. Marks builds on previous conceptions of the *haptic* to create a notion of haptic imagery and cinema. Marks begins by discussing its scientific significations in terms of how humans "experience touch both on the surface

²⁷⁵ Throughout *Kids*, Clark creates scenes of intense homosociality where the viewer is made witness to strong physical and social bonds between young males; however, it is important to note that this celebration of homosociality does not indicate an openness on Clark's part to homosexuality. Many of Clark's films in fact can be said to clearly articulate homophobic tendencies. *Kids* for example features a scene of boys shouting homophobic insults to an openly gay couple, while in *Bully*, for example, the bully (later to be murdered by his peers) is a closeted homosexual that forces his straight best friend to dance against his will for older men in gay clubs. *Wassup Rockers*, for its part, features a caricatured effeminate gay man who spies on one of the teenagers using the toilet; he too ends up dead, falling down the stairs, when the boy pushes him away.

Moreover, when asked about possible queer content in his representations of male youth, Clark quickly responds with an assertion of his heterosexuality, adding, "some people might get it that way. They just can't get past the fact that it's teenage boys. ... if you have fifteen year old kids in your pictures with hard-ons, people are going to think that." (Quoted in Kelley 85). It is interesting to note that despite Clark's consistent interest in marginalised males, he remains clearly reactionary in his response to queer readings of his work.

of and inside our bodies.”²⁷⁶ In terms of looking at a painting or a film, she explains that “optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, [while] haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image.”²⁷⁷ Marks offers up the emblematic examples of examining a lover’s body from up close (haptic) *versus* the type of vision necessary for driving a car (optical).²⁷⁸ While optical perception is more of an intellectual process in which an evaluation of the figures and the level of mimesis takes place, the haptic perception is a more visceral experience that demands that the viewer bring to the images in front of them a sense of the tactile and the kinaesthetic. In other words, through a kind of empathetic process, they must access touch and muscle memories to fully absorb the visual information before them. Films that could be described as haptic are those that compel the spectator “to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into the narrative,”²⁷⁹ (though Marks admits that it is rare that a film will just demand haptic perception). For this reason, haptic images imply a more subjective relationship than that of optical images; as Marks underlines, the former “encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image” and that it creates “a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image.”²⁸⁰

Many scenes in *Kids*, as exemplified by those described above, create this strong sense of the haptic.²⁸¹ Clark skilfully breaks down the boundary between screen and

²⁷⁶ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 162.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 163.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 164.

²⁸¹ This sense of the haptic is manifest in the filmmaker Gus Van Sant’s description of his experience of watching *Kids* for the first time: “Comparisons are hard to come up with, but I’ll try. How about ... the unmistakable smell that lingers on your body for days after the first time you have sex? How about the expression on your face the moment you’ve been told you’ve got AIDS? That’s how intense *Kids* is. I’ve

spectator, one making the viewer almost feel subjectively or empathetically part of the situation at hand. Whether the viewer wants to or not, and to varying intensities, s/he takes on Clark's own ambiguous viewpoint, one that vacillates between optic and haptic; at times, a *voyeur* looking in with enough distance to be fully aware of what is going on, other times, almost viscerally part of the scene. This simulated sense of implication created throughout *Kids* may confuse the viewer's feelings about Clark's take on his subject matter, as s/he is often caught up in its strong haptic effect and therefore has the convoluted sense that what was shown was not merely watched or witnessed, but also experienced - a kind of *logic of the haptic* in which the viewer confounds representation with truth. It is important therefore to realise that though Clark is successful at creating strong haptic imagery of male sexuality, one must not conclude that his haptic representation of teenagers automatically fall into the realm of reality.

The film raises questions as to its realism in terms of the structure of the screenplay's narrative as well as its privileging of the male perspectives. It has been well documented that *Kids* was based on an idea by Clark, which he then commissioned the teenaged Harmony Korine to write for him because he knew how to write convincing dialogue that could be spoken by youth; often the fact that Korine was only nineteen at the time is emphasised as evidence of the reality of the subject matter. Yet, we know that Clark has provided Korine with a plot, one that is, according to Paul Schrader (in particular known for his screenplays for the film, *Taxi Driver*), follows structurally the conventions of a straightforwardly traditional narrative:

Kids adheres to a classic structure. It's chronological, it has a fixed time-frame (24 hours), it deals with one subject at a time. There's some intercutting but it

never had the shock of testing HIV-positive, but that's the one sensation I was left with after watching the film...." (Van Sant 43).

isn't a collage, and you don't enter in the character's thought world or fantasy world.²⁸²

In a sense, *Kids* is an extended proof built on the Clarkian premise that male teenagers just want to have sex and will do so at any price, be it by telling lies to get what they want or using force with no interest in the notion of consenting parties. For this reason, we are not privy to scenes depicting shy or sexually inexperienced youth, only highly sexually aggressive ones, presented here under Clark's trademark universalising title, *Kids*. Moreover, the film rests mostly on the external aspects of his male protagonists' lives, perhaps reflecting again Clark's emphatic belief that they function without thinking, instinctively with little consideration of the consequences. With the exception of the two brief voice-overs by one of the protagonists placed at the beginning and the end of the film, we never have access to their private thoughts; they are always literally acting out. Male youth and their sexuality is in this way literally always on the surface and highly performative; these boys have no inner life, apparently. This lack of awareness or motivation consciousness present in his protagonists is in fact epitomised by the strategic use of voice-overs that frame the film, powerfully colouring how we should view what we will see and have seen within the boy's very macho, heterosexual perspective. The first voiceover tells the viewer that, "When you go to sleep at night, you dream of pussy," serving to highlight the primal, instinctual behaviour of this young male while giving credence to the hyperheterosexualist thrust of the story to come. The last words of the film are spoken by a young man who looking straight into the camera, he asks: "Jesus Christ, what happened?" The fact that he seems confused though he has just actively raped a drugged and drunkenly passed out young woman, serves in a sense to

²⁸² Schrader 77.

remove him from blame. Moreover it lends the film a tone of, as one critic suggests, “tragic inevitability,”²⁸³ thus inscribing this wayward protagonist in the Classical convention of heroic *hubris* integral to the genre of tragedy, while possibly aiming to attain the viewer’s pity or empathy.

Foucault’s Repressive Hypothesis: Discourse by and about Larry Clark

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault elaborates on what he calls the “repressive hypothesis,” in which he suggests sex has become popularly associated with the domain of the hidden and the censored since the Victorian era. Foucault argues that this has conversely given sex an unnecessarily high level of import in Western society. For this reason, the person who speaks openly of this prohibited topic is esteemed as someone who bravely refuses to be silenced; Foucault explains here: “If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, non-existence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression.”²⁸⁴ According to Foucault, the act of talking about this transgressive topic is analogous to Catholic confession, though this time within a secular context. This act is therefore seen in a positive light for within the Catholic tradition, confession of one’s sins is linked with honesty, truth, and redemption. Sex has thus become a subject under constant examination and of continuous discussion. As Foucault explains, “What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that

²⁸³ Amy Taubin, “Chilling and very hot: Larry Clark’s film Kids.” *Sight and Sound* no. 5 (Nov. 1995): 17.

²⁸⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, transl. of *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976) by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 6.

they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*.”²⁸⁵

Close readings of Clark’s discussion of his work reveals just to what extent he feels that his work represents a fight against repressive forces, particularly but not solely *vis-à-vis* his representation of youth sexuality. In one interview, he condemns the conservatism of post-WWII era, speaking admiringly of (and in so doing making parallels between himself and) the American photojournalist, Robert Frank, well-known for his documentation of marginal America:

Before him everything was so uptight, then he came along and loosened things up and showed people this freedom. That uptightness came out of the 1950s and the impression people had then that there's always something you can't show. “Why can't you show everything? This is life and these are people. Whatever people do is ok.”²⁸⁶

By referring to Frank, Clark explicitly inscribes himself into a well-known lineage of photographers committed to documenting reality and to telling the ‘truth’ about the dark underbelly of modern-day America. This is even more explicitly expressed in the *Artforum* interview with Schrader:

PS: *How would you respond to someone who says that in pursuit of the “truth,” Larry Clark panders to sex and violence, and in fact he’s exploiting these kids?*

LC: I would say, This is the world, this is what’s going on. It was the same way when I was a kid: sex and violence. ... It’s why I started making my work, to show what’s really going on. And this is what is really going on.²⁸⁷

At the same time, without denying the fact that Clark has faced censorship and lack of distribution for some of his works because of explicit depictions of youth sexuality,²⁸⁸ he

²⁸⁵ Foucault 23.

²⁸⁶ Neville Wakefield, “Larry Clark, a big-box look back at the revered—and reviled—chronicler of the underbelly of adolescence.” *Interview Magazine* (April 2005).

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_3_35/ai_n13500796 (Accessed 12/12/06)

²⁸⁷ Quoted in Schrader 124.

has nonetheless been able to exhibit these photographs and make these films, and has a strong critical following in film and art circles; his first book and first film made him an important figure in both these worlds with a continuing impact that is felt even today. In his most recent film endeavour, for example, he was invited to contribute to a group film, *Destricted* (2006), dedicated to exploring “the fine line where art and pornography intersect,”²⁸⁹ and featuring the films of eight reknowned European contemporary artists and filmmakers.²⁹⁰ Though the other participants respect the time limit of under twenty minutes, Clark tellingly creates a film of almost double that length. Suggestively titled, *Impaled*, it features Clark interviewing various male youths on the effects of pornography in their lives, as well as casting one of these young men to act in a porn film based on his fantasy, and the shooting of the porn film itself. The film was accepted into official selection categories at prestigious festivals in Cannes, Sundance, Amsterdam, and Edinburgh, and was heralded on *Artforum*’s “Best of 2005” list. In this way, are we wrong in posing the question as to whether Clark really is as controlled and suppressed as his discourse suggests? If anything, his endless and infamous treatment of sexuality has been essential in consolidating his art-star status in the art and film world, as illustrated by the numerous positive comments written about the representation of teen sexuality in *Kids*, as we shall see here.²⁹¹

²⁸⁸ To find out more about Clark’s difficulties in getting *Kids* funded and distributed, see Lynn Hirschberg, “What’s the Matter With Kids Today?” *New York Magazine* June 5, 1995: 33-41.

²⁸⁹ <http://www.destricted.com/media/start.html> (accessed January 27, 2008).

²⁹⁰ In addition to Larry Clark, the film features Marina Abramovic, Matthew Barney, Marco Brambilla, Gaspar Noé, Richard Prince, and Sam Taylor-Wood.

²⁹¹ The African-American cultural critic, bell hooks, for her part, was not seduced by Clark’s film; for a powerfully scathing critique of *Kids*, see her essay, “*Kids*: transgressive subject matter-reactionary film,” *Race, sex and class at the movies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 60-68. She persuasively argues that the film would not have caused such uproar if its main protagonists were black—their sexually predatory nature would have then been perceived as normal: “few people would find this film shocking ... if its primary subjects were inner-city teenage black kids” (hooks 61).

In his essay, “‘Perfect Childhoods’: Larry Clark Puts Boys on Screen,” Sudhir Mahadevan writes that some scenes “leave us with the vestigial feeling of watching the mating habits of animals in a wildlife documentary on the Discovery channel.”²⁹² In the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin says: “Mr. Clark offers neither analysis nor prognosis, but he stunningly captures a world beyond ordinary taboos” and later, “The film maker ... withholds his own judgement on the events seen here, or perhaps doesn’t make any.”²⁹³ The idea that Clark is documenting an unmediated reality is firstly seen as perfectly feasible and secondly understood as courageously admirable especially since his subject matter is so harsh and difficult: “Mr. Clark, making a fierce, daringly unsentimental directorial debut, gives his audience no relief from the ugliness of his character’s behaviour.”²⁹⁴ Although, Maslin appears aware of the potentially problematic nature of Clark’s representation of teens having sex, she brushes over these worries saying, “‘Kids’ is far too serious to be tarred as exploitation.”²⁹⁵ Moreover, she seems to see *Kids* as concrete proof that modern-day male teens are as spiritually depraved as they are sexually voracious when she writes, “As Larry Clark’s ‘Kids’ so harrowingly *demonstrates*, [the two main male protagonists] are part of a spiritually dead teen-age culture built on aimless, casual cruelty and empty pleasure.”²⁹⁶ Although she does not negatively judge the characters’ behaviour in *Kids* as typical examples of youth depravity, the film critic, Amy Taubin, equally stresses the almost scientific reality of Clark’s depiction of teenagers suggesting that their behaviour (non-consensual and/or

²⁹² Mahadevan 102.

²⁹³ Janet Maslin, “Film Review: Kids; Growing Up Troubled, In Terrifying Ways,” *The New York Times* July 21, 1995.

http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?_r=4&andres=990CEEDF1231F932A15754C0A963958260andoref=sloginandoref=sloginandoref=sloginandoref=slogin (Accessed January 27, 2008).

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

unprotected sex, etc.) is a realistic result of the very biochemistry of adolescence, as she says here: “Raging hormones have them jumping out of their skins. ... The boy’s aggression and the girls’ acquiescence aren’t pretty but they’re real. They may not be everykid, but everykid has fears and desires like theirs—even if they never act on them.”²⁹⁷

As can be seen, *Kids* is often praised for Clark’s seeming neutrality or lack of judgement in his depiction of teen sex as a way to suggest that he is simply describing reality as it is. This adopting of the role of truth-teller apparently puts him above ethical concerns - his reputation for detachedly representing scenes of teenage sexual activity apparently validation enough. Within a Foucaultian perspective, this attitude is typical of Western societies who are the only ones to

practice a *scientia sexualis*; or rather, the only civilization to have developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret: ... the confession.²⁹⁸

Keeping in mind Foucault’s notion of *scientia sexualis*, it is interesting to note how accolades are showered upon Clark as a kind of expert on teen sexuality. *Kids* is thus often understood by many critics as a kind of impartial, pedagogical inventory of perverse sexuality in male youth. As Foucault posits, sexuality “must correspond to the functional requirements of a discourse that must produce its *truth*.”²⁹⁹ According to Foucault, the phenomenon of *scientia sexualis* allows essentially for the relentless

²⁹⁷ Taubin 17.

²⁹⁸ Foucault 50.

²⁹⁹ Ibid. 68. (My italics)

surveillance of sexuality which leads to a kind of state of constant arousal that is partially based on the level of control that the viewer has over its object of study. He writes,

The medical examination, the psychiatric investigation, the pedagogical report, and family controls may have the over-all and apparent objective of saying no to all wayward or unproductive sexualities, but the fact is that they function as mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power.³⁰⁰

Clark's role in the making of *Kids* effectively encapsulates this phenomenon of "perpetual spirals of power and pleasure"³⁰¹ in which he is allowed the control of observer documenting the reality of male youth sexuality in the AIDS era of the 1990s, but also the pleasure that this position of authority (on teenage sexuality) affords him, both as someone who gets to watch but also to show-and-tell. Likewise, Clark's viewers are propelled between power and pleasure, between the sensation of control experienced as outside observer and the thrill of witnessing the shocking as *voyeur*. And what about the relatively pleasurable or at least peril-free *frisson* of watching teens having irresponsible and unprotected sex, in conjunction with the sensation of power afforded viewers in their knowledge that they themselves do not have to lose control or undergo situations of (sexual) vulnerability or risk?

In considering our own reactions to watching a work like *Kids*, it becomes clear that power does not manifest itself solely as a restrictive force or strategy. Though Clark prefers to read the problematisation or critique of his representations of young male sexuality as repressive, Foucault poses the question as to why the discourse of power is only perceived in terms of "the law of interdiction,"³⁰² one that is applied from the

³⁰⁰ Ibid. 45.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid. 86.

outside or from above.³⁰³ According to Foucault, this perspective is too simplistic, too *binary*; rather, he suggests the discursive manifestation of power functions from a variety of levels in ways that goes beyond mere oppositions, saying, “we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated discourse.”³⁰⁴

Within this definition, power takes a variety of forms and on a range of levels. However, Clark clearly does not subscribe to such a perspective as it would imply his own inherent participation. It is much more to his benefit to take a clearly black-and-white oppositional stance in his work, as one who aims to express, despite antagonism to his cause, discursively and artistically marginalised or repressed subject matter and themes. (For instance, despite all his talk of just wishing to represent youth sexuality truthfully, Clark, as previously mentioned, aims to suppress queer readings of his work in interviews, while parading a hyper heterosexuality as the dominant norm in his work). I do not wish to undermine the *de facto* censorship Clark’s work has faced, including problems of distribution of his books and films.³⁰⁵ Yet at the same time, this censorship has undoubtedly raised the mythic and monetary value of his work within the art field.³⁰⁶ To eliminate the binary-based value system—outsider *versus* insider, marginalised *versus* mainstream, dominant *versus* suppressed— would be to diminish Clark’s importance as transgressor in the art world, especially given Western art’s interest with the outsider as art producer and its subsequent aestheticisation within a larger visual culture. This

³⁰³ Ibid. 94.

³⁰⁴ Ibid. 100.

³⁰⁵ For instance, given its explicit scenes of auto-erotic asphyxiation, incest, and actual (group) sex between teens (complete with cum shot), Clark’s *Ken Park* (2002) has been banned in Australia and up to the present has no U.S. distributor.

³⁰⁶ A used first edition of *Teenage Lust*, for example, can be currently bought on amazon.com for hundreds of US dollars.

constant shifting of power is especially interesting if we look at how Clark's depictions of male youth has influenced stylistic choices in the worlds of fashion and fashion advertising.

Discussing Modernist primitivism, Frances S. Connelly writes, "The dissatisfaction with the fine-arts tradition and the desire to rejuvenate it prompted the incorporation of "outside" elements on the periphery. By the controlled assimilation of the wild and untamed, the old and staid might be reanimated."³⁰⁷ In this way, she argues not only that *avant-garde* artists, despite protests to the contrary, functioned firmly within the workings of the artistic milieu and its systemic workings; moreover, she reminds us that they could not ever break free of "the aesthetic norms ... because the center of academic classicism determined the ways they rebelled against it."³⁰⁸ Finally, Connelly convincingly posits that European art has always functioned through the extension of its margins (paralleling its own strategies of expansion the empire) "as elements that had existed in the fringe were assimilated" and the "peripheral net was cast farther and farther as a voracious modern culture incorporated "primitive" style after another more radically 'other.'"³⁰⁹ Western art within this perspective becomes essentially a continual absorption of the marginal. As Pierre Bourdieu has argued in *The Rules of Art*, it is essentially impossible to escape this assimilation of innovation and subversivity; the most transgressive works eventually and inevitably become normalised. Bourdieu writes,

the most innovative works tend, *with time*, to produce their own audience by imposing their own structures, through the effect of familiarization, as categories of perception legitimate for possible work ... The spreading of the norms of perception and appreciation they were tending to impose is

³⁰⁷ Connelly, 34.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 35.

accompanied by a banalization of the effect of debanalization that they were once able to exercise.³¹⁰

For these reasons, it is obviously impossible to feel the same shock experienced by the first viewers of *Tulsa*. Clark's imagery of sexualised (male) youth has discernably entered into late twentieth-century artistic canon of photography and film, and on a wider level as an aesthetic in the world of fashion advertising. Expressions like "heroin chic" and "trash glam" are oft equated with fashion spreads and advertising campaigns that, beyond their ultimate objective to sell clothing, make-up, perfume, and other products to potential customers, are considered to have a cutting edge or gritty quality. With such photographers as Nan Golden, Terry Richardson (figure 48), Steven Meisel (figure 49), and Ryan McGinley documenting images of drugs, sexuality, and youth both in art and fashion magazines, Clark's style and subject matter have become increasingly recognisable and even acceptable. To conclude, I will examine how this imagery becomes eventually normalised and ubiquitous within mainstream visual culture.

³¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* [*Les Règles de l'art*, 1992], trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 253.

Conclusion

Radical Chic: Mainstreaming an Aesthetic of Male Youth as Primitive

In a feature entitled, “Larry’s Kids,”³¹¹ for the Italian men’s magazine, *L’Uomo Vogue*, Clark provides photographs featuring the teenage boys from *Wassup Rockers* (many of them to be later featured in his recent exhibition and publication at the Luhning Augustine Gallery in Fall 2007). These are interspersed with photographs by the fashion photographer, Steven Klein, of two of the boys (Jonathan and Kiko) dressed in clothing by such *haute couture* designers as Christian Dior and Ralph Lauren. On the magazine cover, Clark is dressed in casual black and flanked by the two boys who are suavely styled (black ties, sweaters and pants, with white shirts). All three are rather incongruously posed with skateboards—those of the boys’ are colourfully decorated while Clark’s is plain black. With their slicked-back long hair and deadpan expressions in tandem with Clark’s equally serious but craggy face framed by a fedora (what would appear to be his only concession to high fashion), they play out the tough guy characters from a gangster film, lending this glossy, expensive Italian magazine a coveted street-wise, even slightly sinister edge.³¹² Little matter that in seeing the film, the viewer discovers that these apparently tough little hoods are actually quite sweet and certainly not violent: Jonathan has a soft ineffectual voice and modest demeanour that together undercut his good looks, while Kiko has a charming crooked-toothed smile and is a bit of

³¹¹ Besides referencing Clark’s first film, the title with its use of the possessive form suggests the magazine’s desire to depict his relationship with these teenagers in a positive paternal light. At the same time, it hints at the almost proprietary perspective that Clark appears to have *vis-à-vis* his subjects. (Larry Clark and Steven Klein, “Larry’s Kids,” *L’Uomo Vogue* (October 2005) [no page numbers given].

³¹² Interestingly, this photograph calls to mind the film sequence section in *Tulsa* that features Clark’s friends dressed in dark suits while pretending to be gangsters.

a joker. Obvious parallels can be made with this photograph and the aforementioned “Larry Clark and Justin Pierce” (see Introduction) and “Self-portrait with teenagers” (see Chapter 2), though this time the image is presented not in or around the work of art itself, but inserted into the realm of fashion and advertising.

In *The Social Lives of Things*, Arjun Appadurai expands on the notion of commodities, which he defines not in the fixed Marxist sense but rather as objects that have different values and status depending on the cultural and social context; in this way, commodities “refer to things that, at a certain phase in their careers and in a particular context, meet the requirements of commodity candidacy.”³¹³ According to Appadurai, objects shift contexts thanks to “strategies of diversion” which may involve, for instance, the “calculated and “interested” removal of things from an enclaved zone to one where exchange is less confined and more profitable, in some short term sense.”³¹⁴ Appadurai suggests that fashion is often rooted in strategies of diversion in which the diversion in itself becomes commoditised, what he calls “commoditization by diversion, where value, in the art or fashion market, is accelerated or enhanced by placing objects and things in unlikely contexts.”³¹⁵ Appadurai does not take a judgmentally disparaging position on these diversions, calling them, “sign[s] of creativity or crisis, whether aesthetic or economic.”³¹⁶ He does however underline that, “Diversions are meaningful only in relation to the paths from which they stray,”³¹⁷ adding those that “become predictable are on their way to becoming new paths.”³¹⁸

³¹³ Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value,” in Ed. A. Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 16.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.* 25.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.* 28.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.* 26.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.* 29.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Appadurai offers up an interesting lens through which to understand the movement of Clark's images of sexy bad boys and its "edgy" aesthetic into the fore of contemporary art and cinema, and its impact on and infiltration of popular visual culture. In a way, his images are like objects that move between different fields, from personal to public, from commodity in the art market to commodity in the fields of film or fashion.

³¹⁹ If his aesthetic has influenced such important film directors as Gus Van Sant (*Drugstore Cowboy*), Paul Schrader (*Taxi Driver*), and Francis Ford Coppola (*Rumblefish*),³²⁰ and photographers such as Nan Goldin, Ryan McKinley, and Ed Templeton, he has equally been important in shaping the look of such youth-focused magazines as *Vice* and *The Face*, and advertising campaigns by such fashion photographers as Terry Richardson, Steven Meisel, and Corinne Day. But if Clark's work has been endlessly pastiched by others through processes of diversion in the fashion world, he has equally participated in the commoditisation of his own style, and by this token, more disturbingly, the commoditisation of his subjects.

Clark's participation in the commoditisation by diversion of his own imagery in the fashion industry has, in fact, become a constant. For another spread for the high-end European fashion magazine, *Arena+Homme*, Clark contributes black-and-white previously unpublished photographs from *Tulsa* in conjunction with colour fashion photographs of the lead actor, Leo Fitzpatrick from *Kids*, now grown up, wearing clothes

³¹⁹ Though some prefer to maintain high- and low-art distinctions, Clark is certainly not alone in his crossover from art to fashion. Recent collisions between the two milieus can be found in Takashi Murakami's collaborations on luxury items for Louis Vuitton, Ryan McGinley's publicity campaigns for Puma, Damien Hirst's designs for Levis, and Paul P's drawings for Dior Homme.

³²⁰ Van Sant 43.

inspired by those that appeared in Clark's first book (figure 50).³²¹ The outtakes from *Tulsa* are evidently strategically placed there to inject an element of edginess into what would otherwise be a fairly straightforward fashion feature; likewise for the use of Fitzpatrick as model—famously known for being untrained as an actor in his *début* in *Kids*. His bodily (and tattooed) presence further augments this general aura of authenticity that goes beyond the merely sartorial. What Appadurai terms the “aesthetics of decontextualisation”³²² is obviously a successful strategy here, one that has long offered the thrill of the new or the exotic in Western art and visual culture, as typified by the primitivist appropriations of such Modernist artists as Picasso,³²³ in which African masks once used within specific cultural contexts are represented in paintings to be hung in galleries and drawing rooms in elite circles in Europe. Likewise, the strategic placement of Clark's edgy aesthetic and sexualised imagery of men in fashion magazines may have once offered a “diversion” from a well-inscribed “path” in Appadurai's sense, but has now become an established one that no longer has the sense of the unexpected, generating no great shock of the unexpected in the viewer but rather a feeling of recognition. It is also important to note that, in these two cases, readers are expected to be *cognoscenti* of Larry Clark and his bad-boy personal and professional reputation as photographer and filmmaker. In this way, even as the magazine and the clothes that they promote are but mass-produced commodities, the magazine nonetheless is able to uphold its highbrow aura of exclusivity through their public's connoisseurship of Clark's *oeuvre*,

³²¹ Larry Clark, “1963/2002: Leo Fitzgerald Portraits in Brooklyn, Summer 2002 Against Unpublished *Tulsa* Images,” *Arena+Homme*, issue 18 (Autumn/Winter 02/03) [no page numbers given]. My thanks to Jim Verburg for bringing these images to my attention.

³²² Appadurai 28.

³²³ It is interesting to note Clark's sense of connection to Picasso; he clearly articulates this desired lineage with this legendary primitivist artist in his autobiographical photographic exhibition, entitled, *punk Picasso*, presented at Lühring Augustine Gallery, New York City from May 10-June 23, 2003.

what Appadurai describes, “a *traffic in criteria*” in which “knowledge about commodities is itself increasingly commoditized.”³²⁴ These kinds of advertising depend integrally on this knowledge.

Likewise Clark’s imagery of sexualised male youth has entered into the canon of late twentieth-century photography and film through processes of banalisation but perhaps more discernably and even more widespread in the world of fashion and advertising. We need go no further than the usage of expressions like “heroin chic” and “skater style” in current vocabulary, to realise that it is the look, and not the *way of life* that has necessarily stuck. Style after all requires little more than a certain employment of eyeliner and hair product, mixed with the right kind of (slouchy) demeanour and clothing, with no actual engagement in any kind of subculture necessary. In this way, the specificity of Clark’s representations of subcultures risks being undermined, becoming merely a surface shorthand for the overarching values of anti-establishmentism, subversion, transgression, and authenticity within the worlds of fashion and advertising.

The various characteristics of primitivism outlined in Chapter 1 offer up many interesting points of entry into Larry Clark’s portrayals of male youth. Its reverberations are felt in his ethnographic investigations of the activities, styles, and vernaculars of various subcultures, often before their representation become ubiquitous in mainstream culture and media. Though Clark seems commendably interested in depicting these socially marginalised groups (“speed freaks” in small-town Ohio; male hustlers in New York City; skaters;³²⁵ Latino skaters in a Los Angeles ghetto) in a realistic, non-

³²⁴ Appadurai 54.

³²⁵ Clark, speaking in the pre-skateboard-park era of New York City of the early 1990s, compares skaters to “outlaws” because “[t]hey’re kicked out of every place, the police hate them.” (Clark quoted in Taubin 18).

judgemental manner, at the same time, his characters are often defined in opposition to adulthood or authority, embodied by such derisively depicted stock figures as clueless parents or overly restrictive policemen. Coasting on a paradigm that could be described as the physically authentic *versus* the socially conventional, Clark's identification with marginal youth and their activities effectively telegraphs his rejection of mainstream, middle-class values. This positioning of himself as outsider is comparable to that of many Modernist *avant-garde* artists.

Parallels with primitivism can be made with Clark's preference for "bad boys"—slackers, hustlers, bullies, rapists, killers—portrayed in acts of deviance (well-behaved, pre-sexual, or articulate boys are usually not of interest). His anti-heroes are strongly characterised by their sexuality, usually a *macho* or exaggerated articulation of heterosexuality, often linked with death or aggression. If primitivism is essentially binary in nature, the dangerous if not perversely *barbaric* underside of their sexuality is juxtaposed by Clark's framing of their naked or half-dressed youthful bodies, often showing them from extremely close-up angles or bathed in luscious light, an eroticising focus that suggests the idealisation of the savage within the practice of Romantic primitivism. Certainly Clark does not associate his very urban youth with the pastoral, however, he seems to venerate them for their physicality and instinct, driven mostly by sex drives and living only for the present. They are his 'primitives'—highly sexual, uncivilised, and ripe with a desirable 'authenticity.'

If Clark's first work had a clearly autobiographical thrust, this is no longer the case in the latter part of his career. As a man in his fifties and sixties during the making

In another article, he reiterates their marginal status in increasingly hyperbolic terms: "[T]hey have this freedom and they're outlaws. They're like the Hell's Angels!" (Hirschberg 36).

of *Kids* and *Wassup Rockers*, his longing for insider status in groups which he can never fully be a part of (no matter how much time he spends with them and no matter what his claims) begs comparison with the anthropologist's ambiguous insider-outsider perspective. Clark's accessing of marginalised or dysfunctional groups is often offered up by the artist as evidence of his special capacity to represent and speak for these youth, if not *all* youth. This however harks once again back to the *avant-garde* artists' desire to play out "the role as a rediscoverer or prophet of some more direct, 'primitive' mode of expression,"³²⁶ as well as the ethnographer's desire to make universalising claims about humanity at large. As Clark's art practice has taken him further and further away from his own age (and sometimes ethnocultural) group, and given that his process often involves extended periods of time spent with his subjects, links can be made with Gill Perry's trope of the "going away,"³²⁷ and the European tradition of *flânerie* in the *avant-garde* artist's career. In this way, not only does he achieve the desired outsider status but also finds new inspiration and credibility for his own work.

It needs to be underlined once again that as these subcultures become more and more part of the mainstream, Clark searches for new marginalised groups to focus on, in order to lend his work the edge and the thrill of the insider perspective on outsiders that his work is best known for. Today, skaters no longer have "outlaw" status, as proven by the many now-turned-mainstream magazines and popular websites dedicated to skater culture (*Skateboarder*, *Thrasher*, *Bail*, etc.), the huge fashion and sports industries that target its followers and fans, and its presence on television (case in point: skaterboy Bart, the cocky, wise-cracking protagonist in the long-running television series, *The Simpsons*).

³²⁶ Perry 8.

³²⁷ Ibid.

Likewise, if Clark's photographic images of drugged-out white youth in *Tulsa* and male hustlers in *Teenage Lust* no longer shock, simply serving as *style* fodder for the sexy, slightly seedy aesthetic found in the pages and editorial posturing of *Vice* magazine (figure 51), or the art direction of Calvin Klein and American Apparel ad campaigns, clearly it is in Clark's interest to find "new marginals" - whether in terms of ethnic subcultures unrepresented in the mainstream media (first-generation Hispanic skater kids in *Wassup Rockers*) or scandalous real-life stories (high schoolers who plot to kill a peer in *Bully*, young men up for rape charges³²⁸). One cannot help but think of Frances Connolly's analysis of the *avant-garde* artist's practice of appropriation of the "primitive" as a "peripheral net ... cast farther and wider as a voracious modern culture incorporated one "primitive" style after another more radically "other."³²⁹ Moreover, the normalisation of images *à la* Larry Clark within the visual culture of the past decade (a normalisation that depends on the appropriation of his subject matter and style resulting in imagery of semi-clothed, gaunt fashion models lolling about) suggests the speed with which this otherness is commoditised, and that peripheral becomes centre.

Works such as *Tulsa* and *Kids* have evidently become absorbed as acceptable (in terms of Clark's aesthetic but also his subjects - in his words: "still real people even if you catch them when the light is right"³³⁰) into Western photographic and cinematic canons. Moreover, his influence has been further extended and normalised *via* advertising and fashion markets. This canonisation of style and subject matter in tandem with their subsequent appropriation by mainstream commercial arenas, has meant that

³²⁸ See the exhibition catalogue, Larry Clark, *Larry Clark* (Groningen, Holland: Groninger Museum, 1999), featuring a series of video stills taken from television footage of handsome white youths charged with committing rape; these images are presented with no commentary.

³²⁹ Connolly 95.

³³⁰ Clark quoted in Kelly 83.

Clark has had to work hard constantly to find new boundaries to cross and fresh marginals to picture in order to maintain his reputation as cutting-edge spokesperson for youth and documenter of youth culture and delinquency (stagings of auto-erotic asphyxiation in *Perfect Childhood* and *Ken Park*, teenage murder based on a real-life story in *Bully*, Latino ghetto kids in *Wassup Rockers*, real sex for *Ken Park* and *Destricted*). Without undermining the very real impact that Clark's work has had on the fields of art, cinema, fashion, and advertising, the question must be posed as to whether the lasting legacy of his photographs and films lies primarily in its contribution to a primitivism of youth, through the creation and commoditisation of an iconography and aesthetics of the marginal or degenerate young male.

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Figures



Larry Clark and Justin Pierce

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

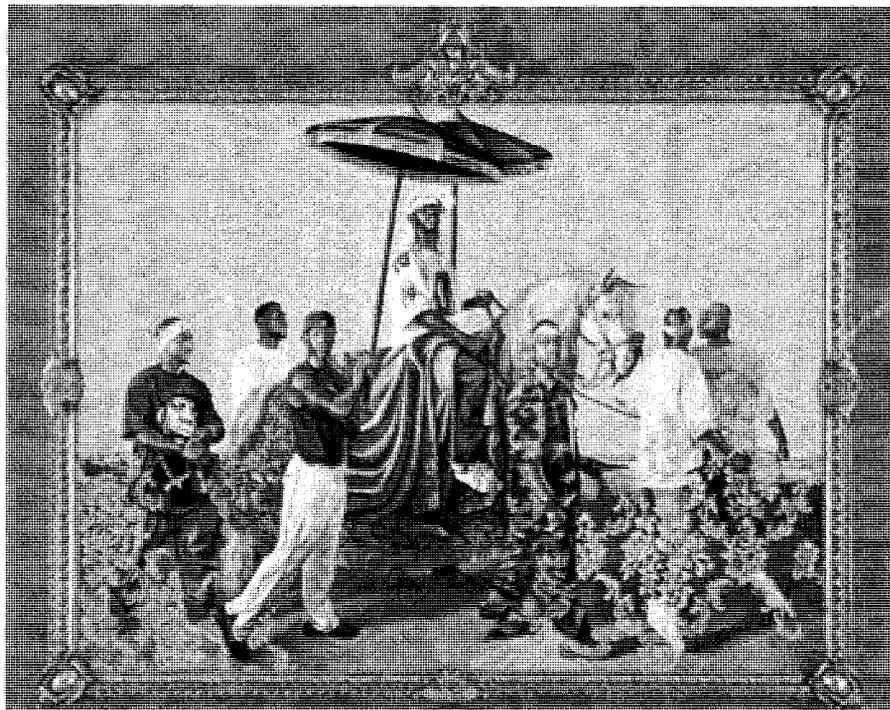


Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

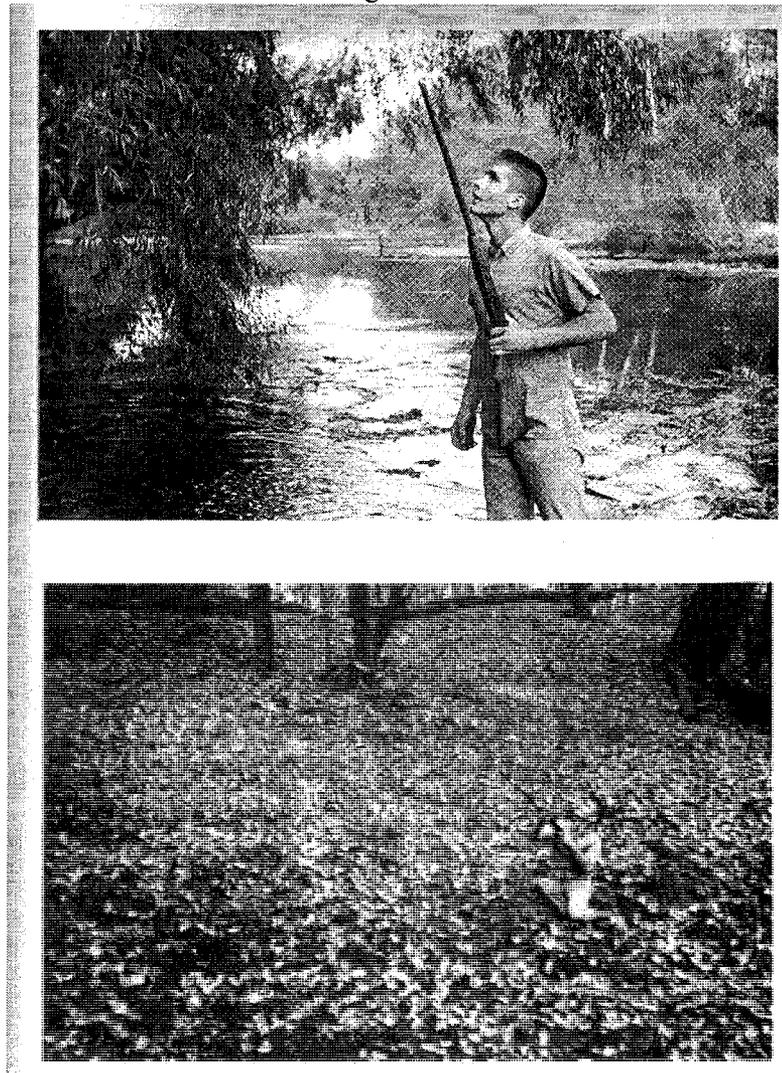


Figure 12

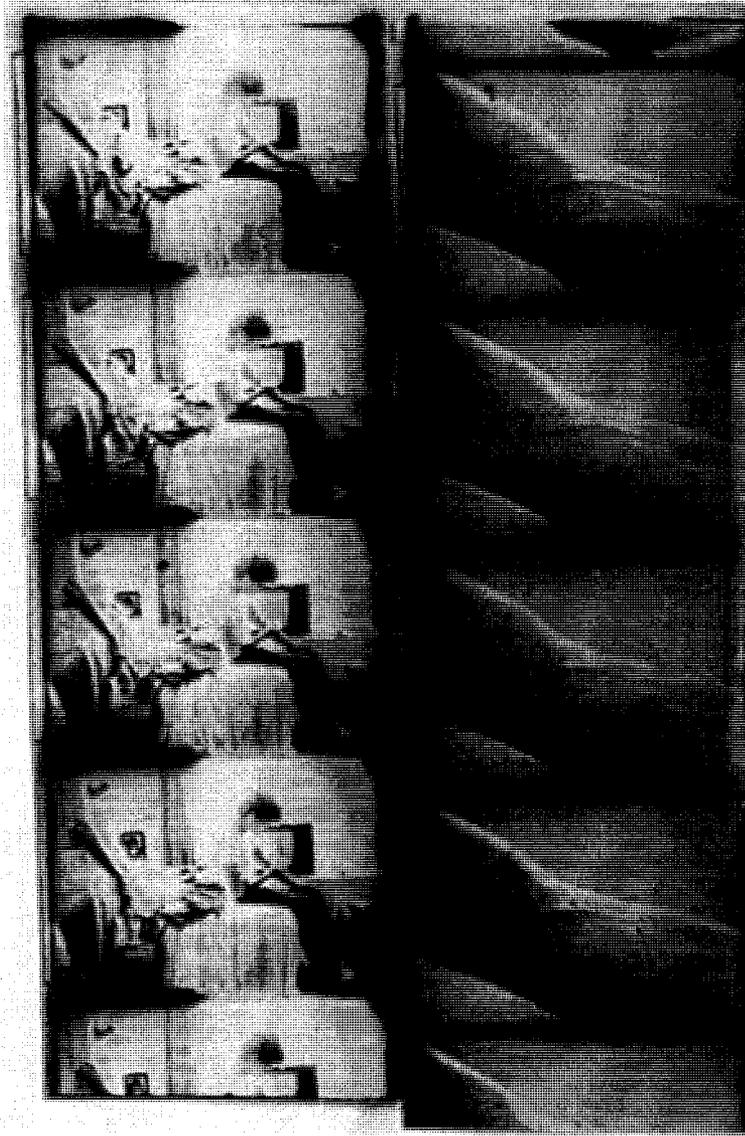


Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17

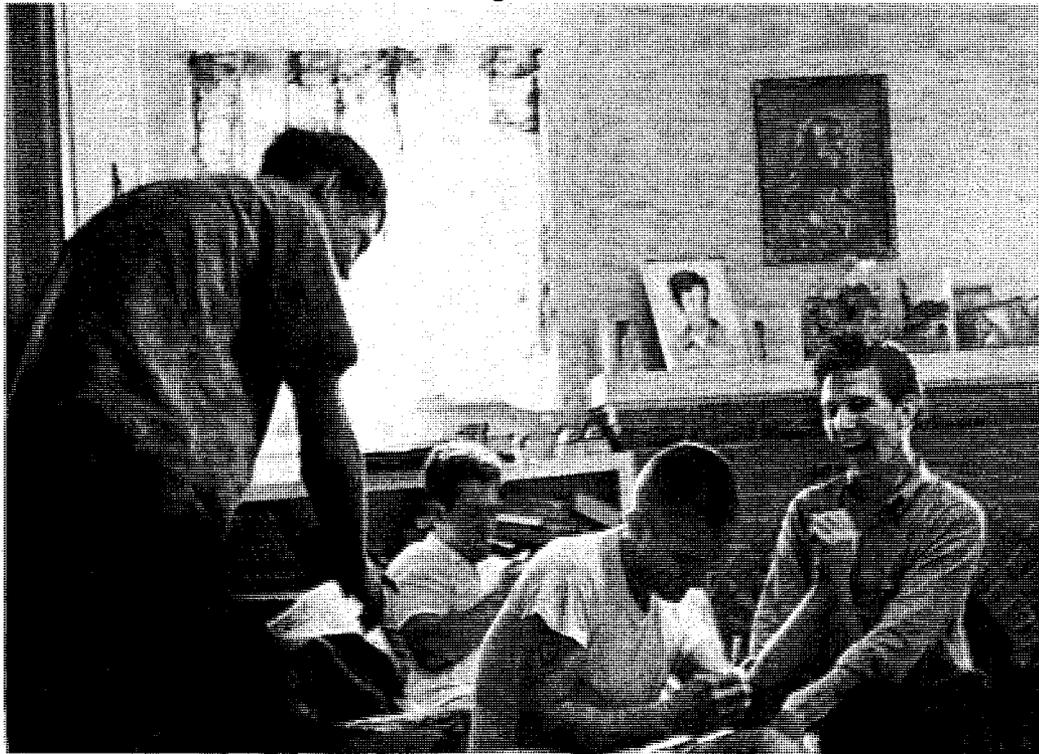


Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21

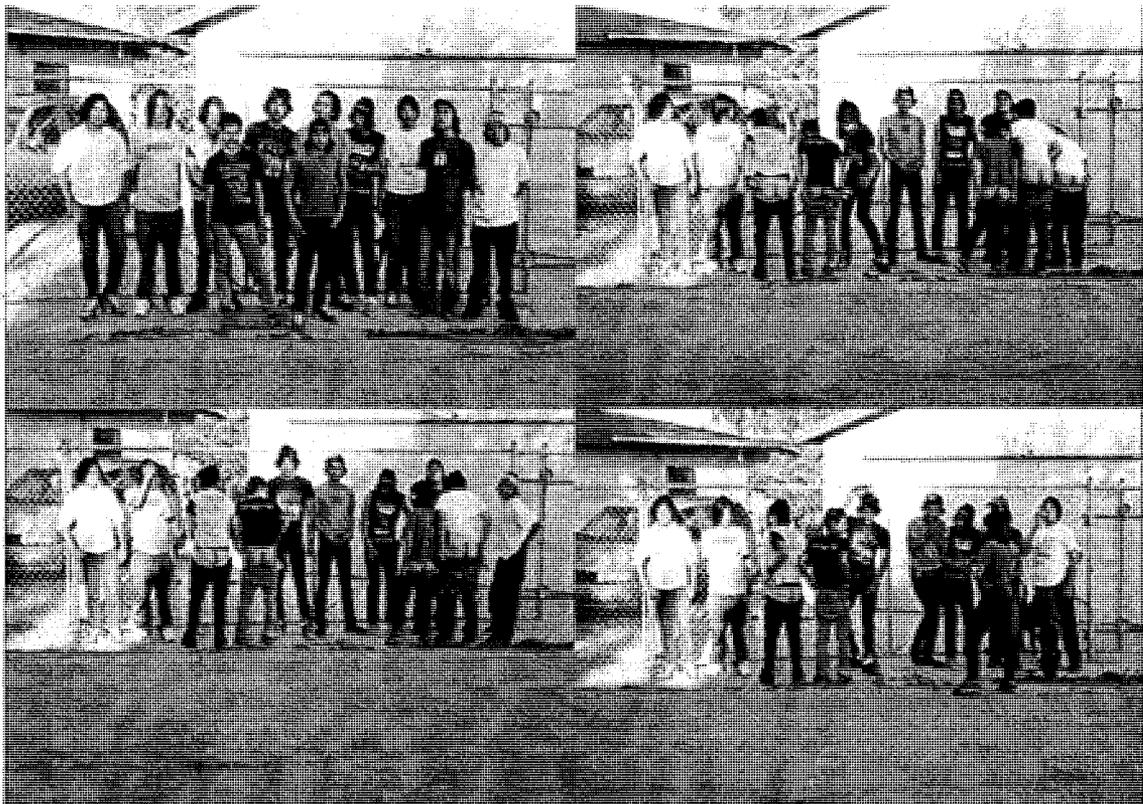


Figure 22



Figure 23

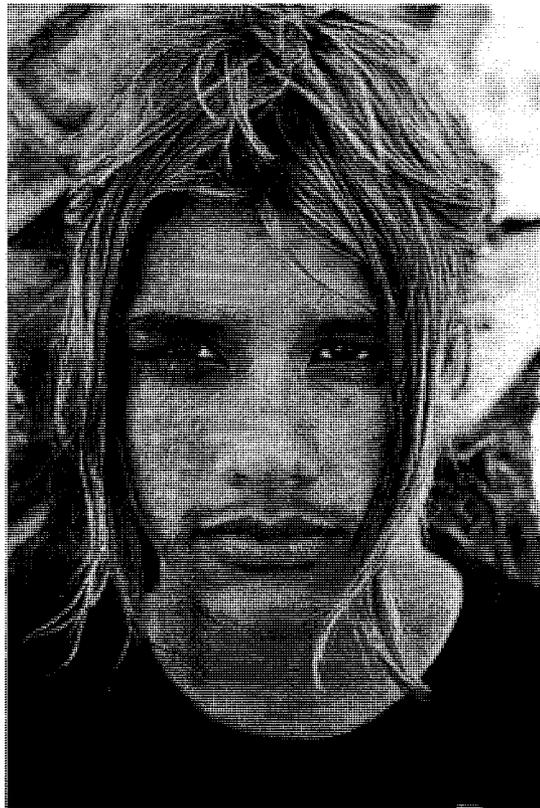


Figure 24

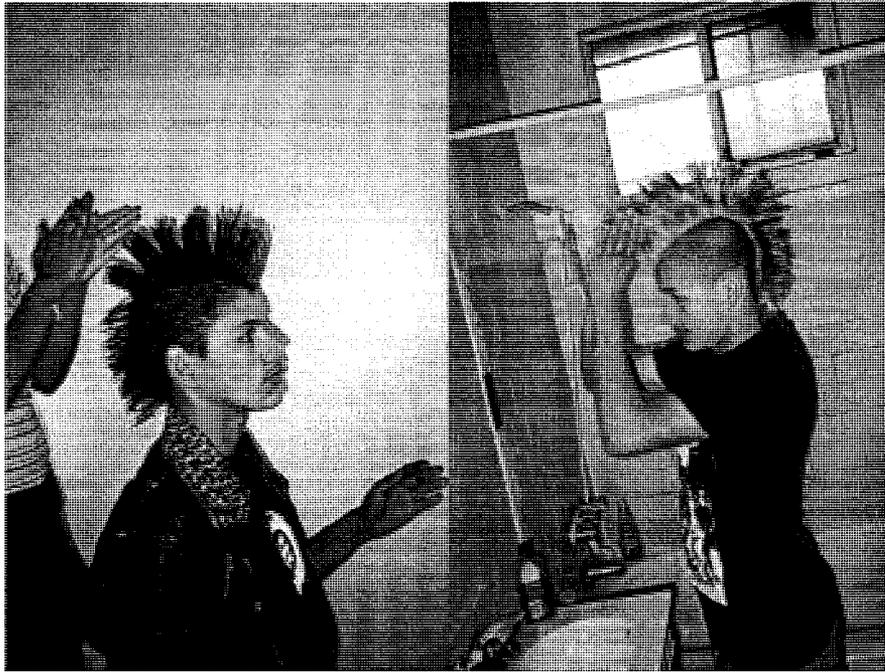


Figure 25



Figure 26

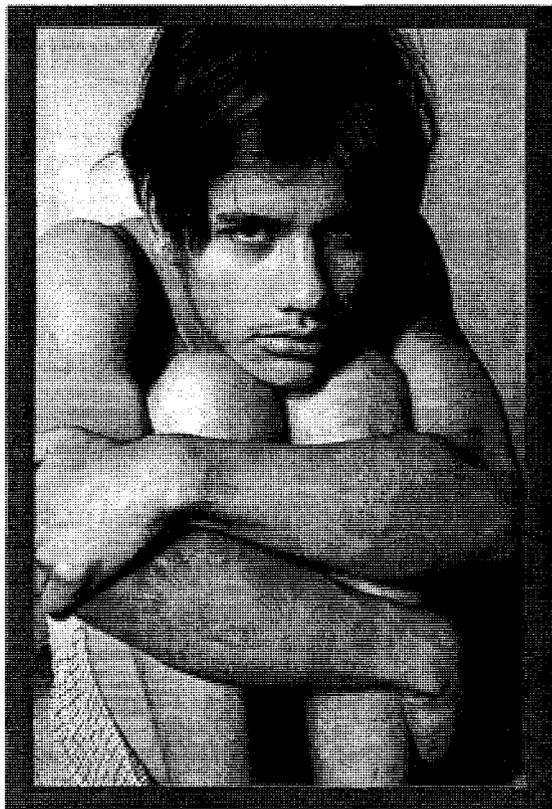


Figure 27



Figure 28

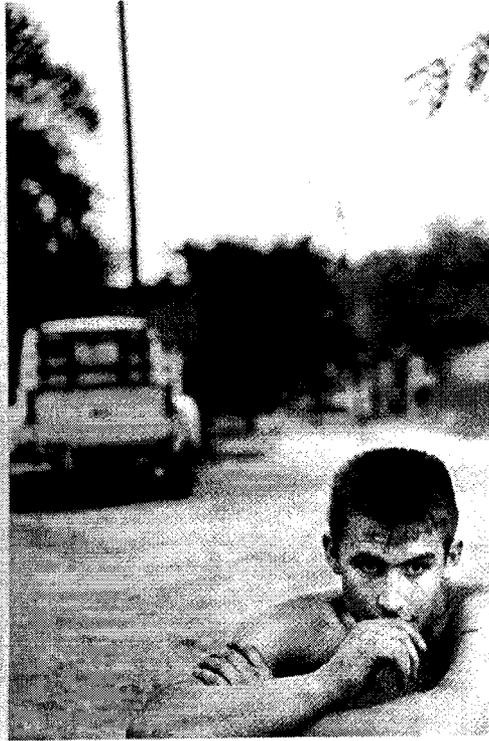


Figure 29



Figure 30

1963



david roper

Figure 31



billy mann

Figure 32

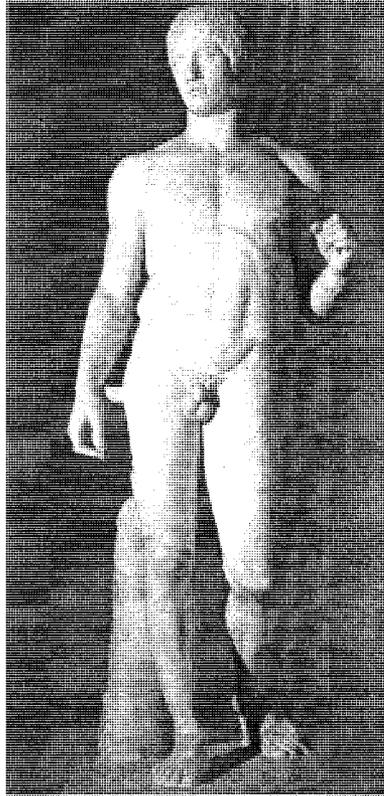


Figure 33



Figure 34

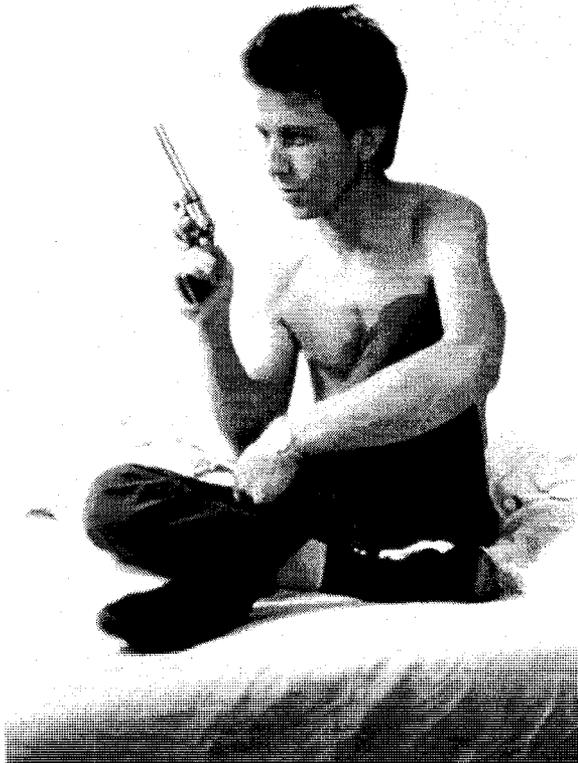


Figure 35

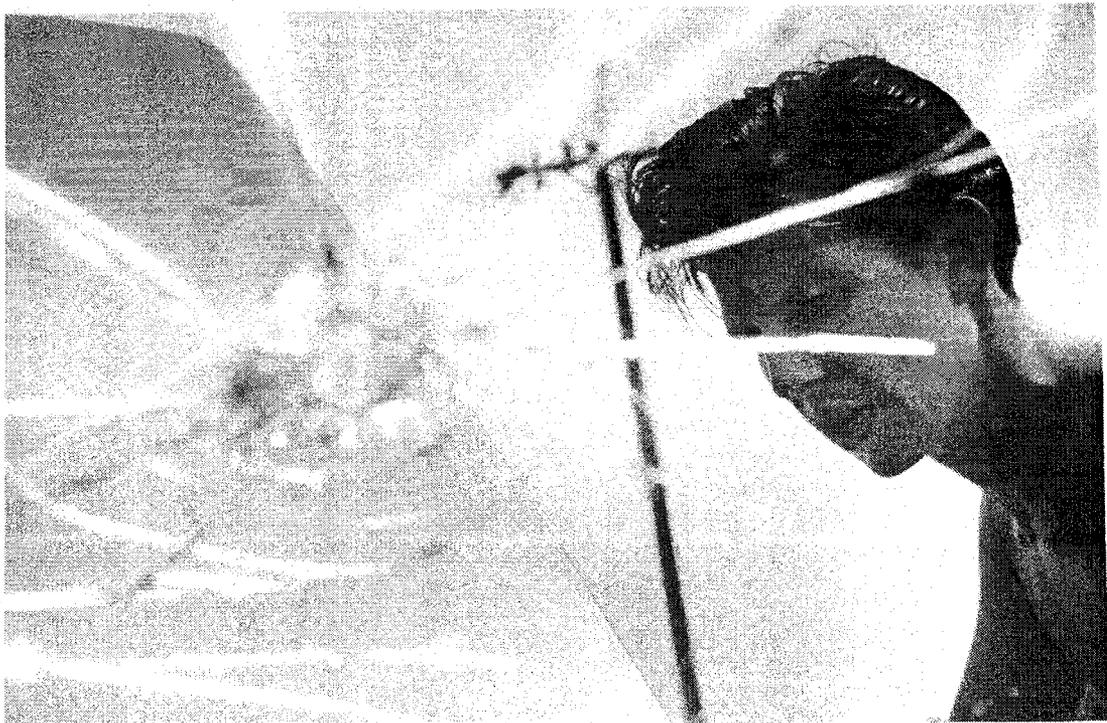


Figure 36



accidental gunshot wound

Figure 37



Figure 38



Figure 39

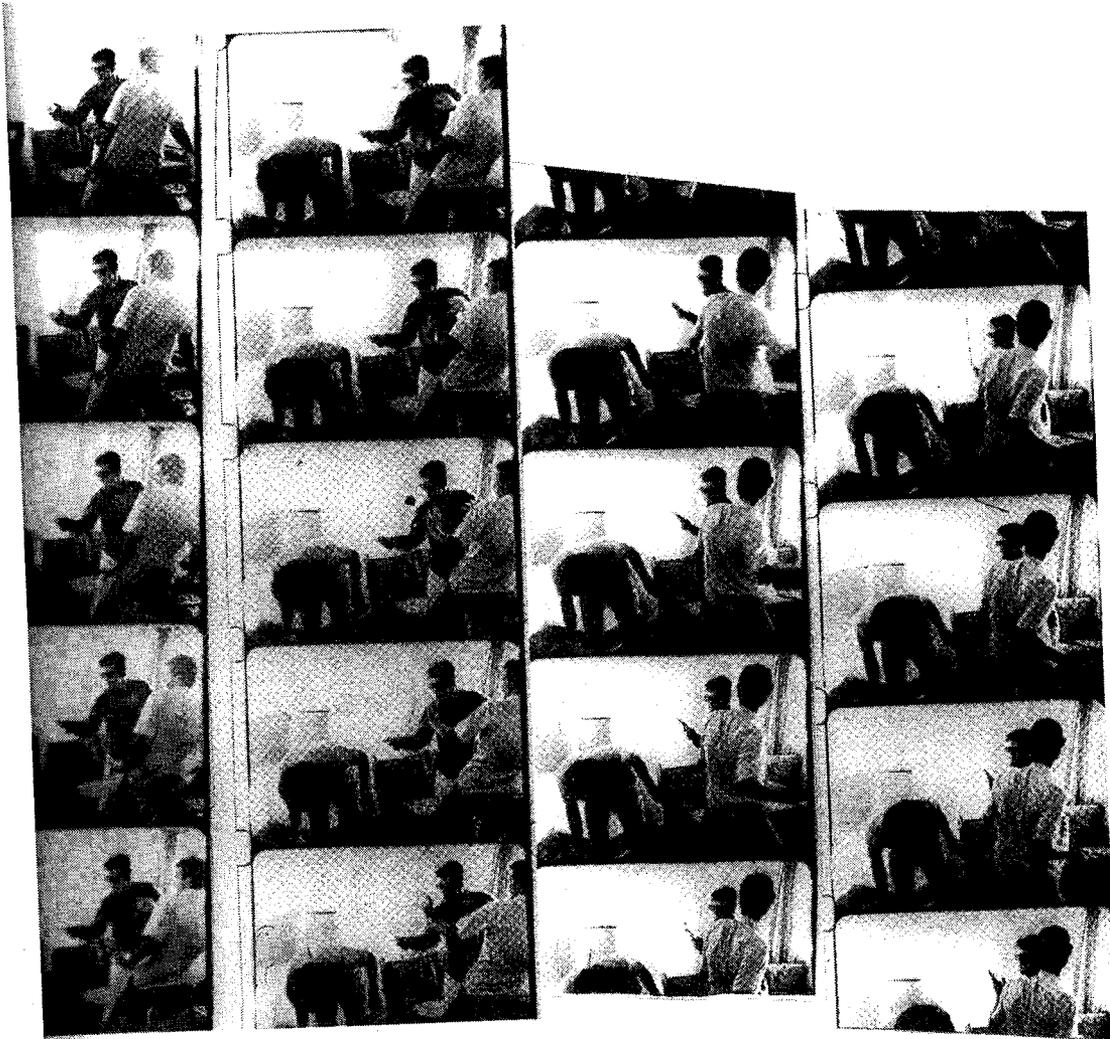
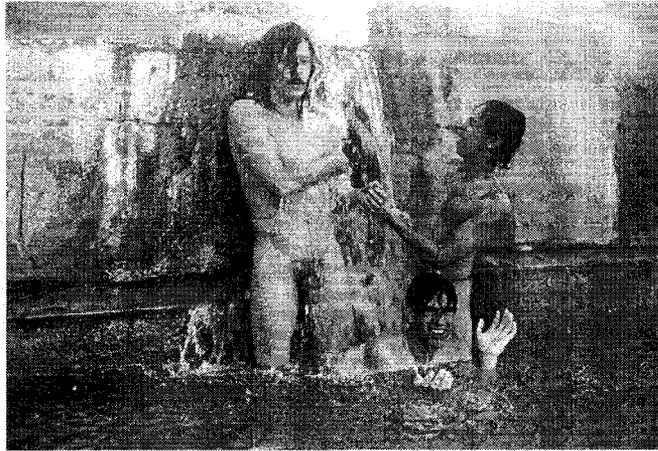


Figure 40



Self portrait with teenagers

Figure 41



Figure 42

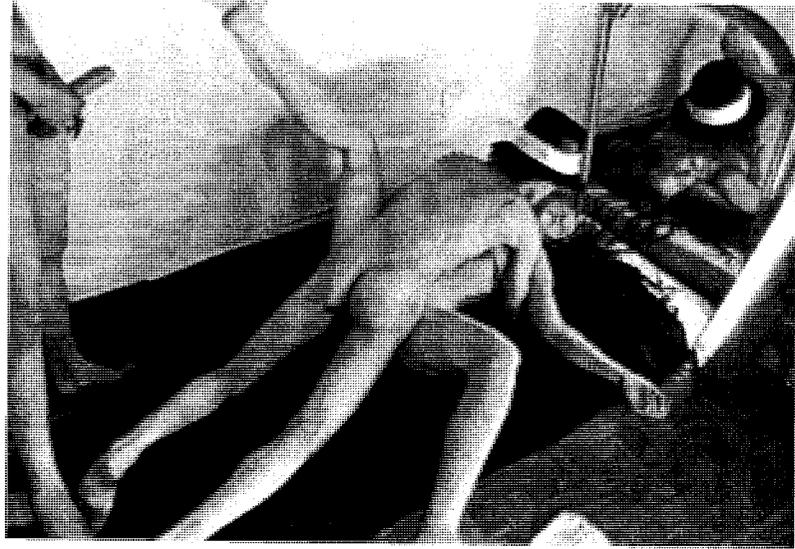


Figure 43



Figure 44



Figure 45

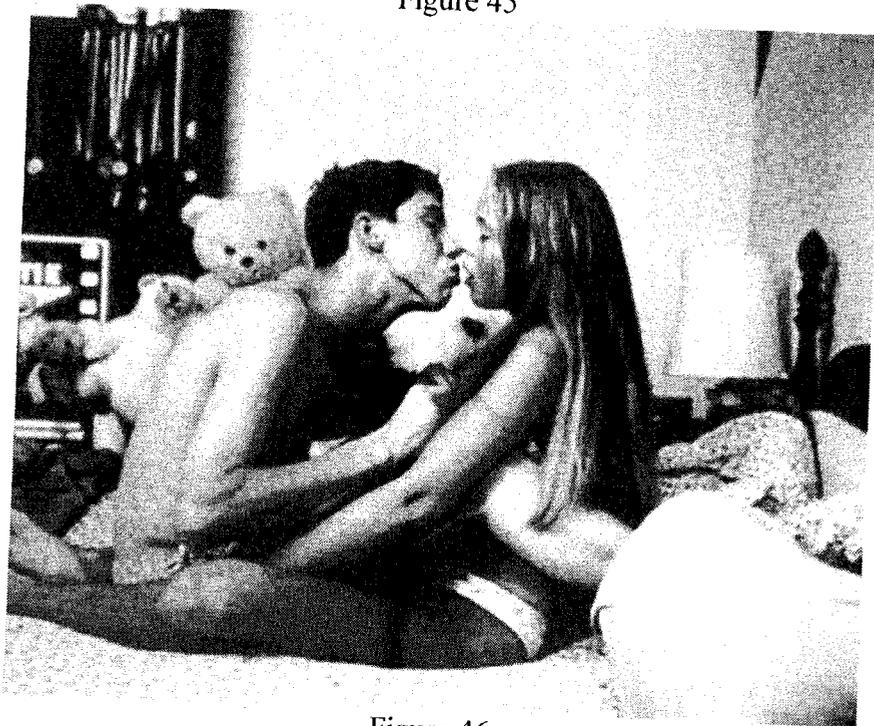


Figure 46



Figure 47

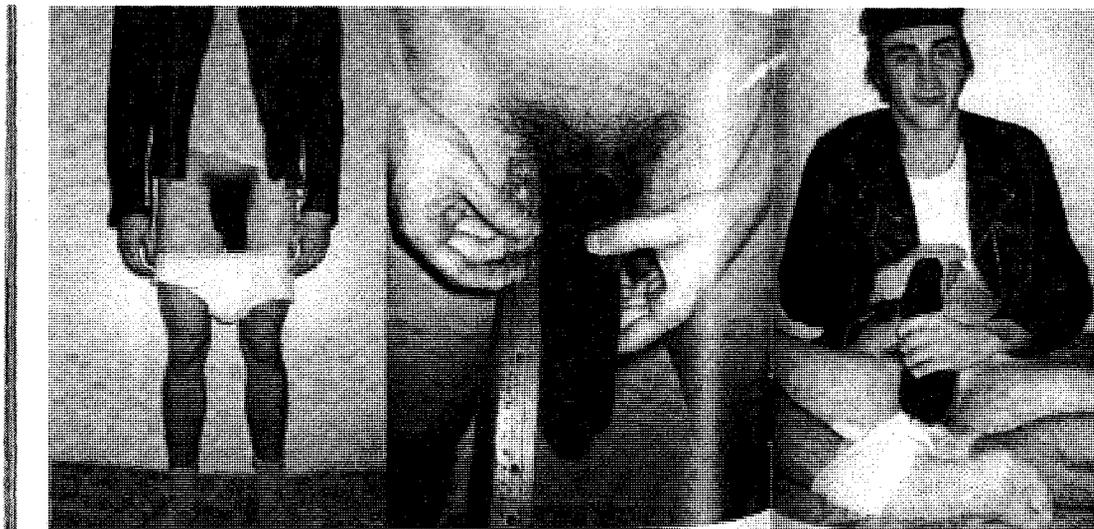


Figure 48

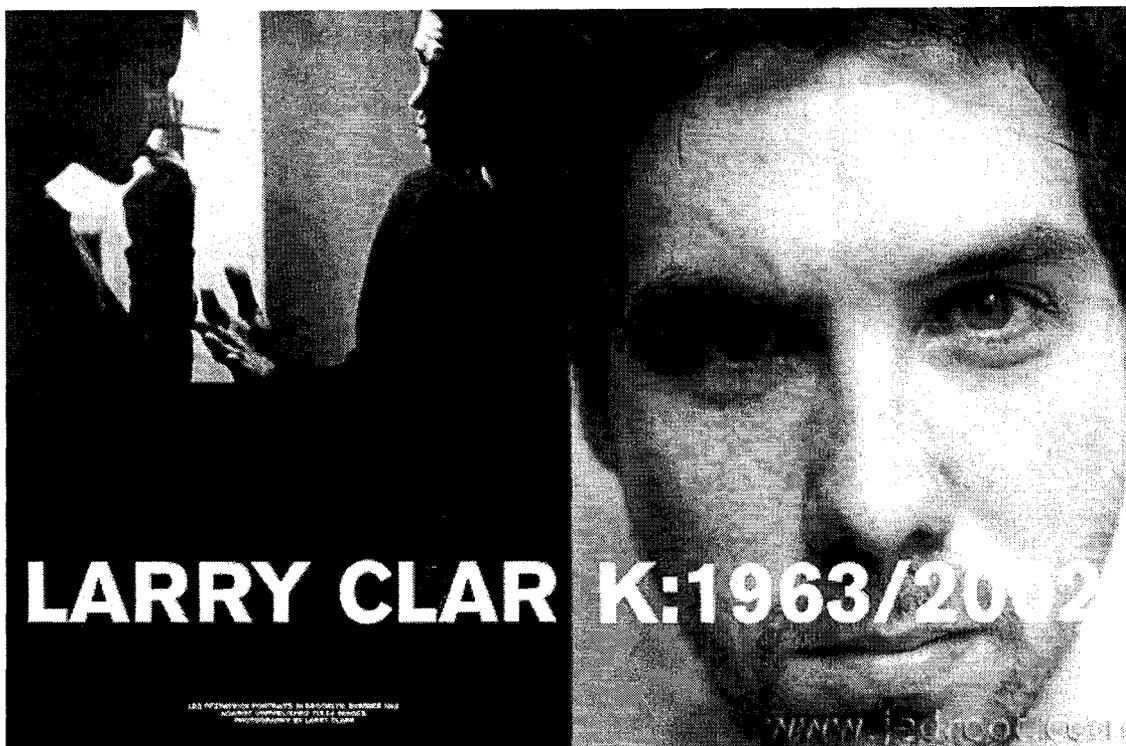


Figure 50



Figure 51