DISSS-CO (A FRAGMENT)
From *Before Pictures*, a Memoir of 1970s New York

Douglas Crimp

Among the papers from the mid-1970s that I kept when I purged my files during a mid-1990s apartment renovation are a few pages of something I had begun writing about disco. They were in a dog-eared folder marked "projects." Everything else in the folder is art-related, including a proposal for a book on contemporary art. I'm amazed now at the hubris of believing I could write a full-scale book about "art from Minimal sculpture forward," but pleasantly surprised to see evidence that I was thinking about contemporary art under the rubric of *postmodernism* as early as 1976. "The starting point," I wrote, "is to discuss the important shift from Modernism to Post-Modernism."[1]

The few pages on disco in this folder are the only ones I had looked at between the time I wrote them and now. The reason is that they carry a particular sentimental value. Around the time I wrote them, Guy Hocquenghem visited New York and stayed with me in my loft on Chambers Street, and one night while I was out, he read what I'd written. When I returned later, he said to me that such a straightforward description of gay culture was just the sort of thing that gay activists should be writing. I was embarrassed that Guy had found and read the pages. I'm self-conscious about my unfinished writing; this was not at all the sort of writing I did professionally and thus had any confidence in; and, though a couple of years younger than me, Guy was both a heartthrob and an idol. While still in his early twenties, he had been one of the founders of the FHAR (Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire, the French gay liberation organization) and a year later, in 1972, published *Homosexual Desire.*[2] Although he had subsequently published a second gay liberation tract, *L'Après-mai des faunes,* he was now turning his attention from theory to fiction. He had recently published *Fin de section,* a collection of short stories, and begun work on his first novel, *Love in Relief.* Perhaps the storylike way I begin the fragment on disco is what attracted Guy to it. Eventually, in 1980, he would write his

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own descriptions of gay life in *Le Gay voyage,* his guide to the gay scene in a number of major cities.[3] Here is what Guy read:

> The sun seemed unnaturally bright when we opened the door and walked out onto lower Broadway. Steven adjusted the pitch-black wrap-around sunglasses that he'd put on in the lobby. As we walked down Houston Street toward the Village, our bodies still gyrated, slowing our walk to a rhythmic amble. Moving at all was slightly painful and yet felt inevitable, as if the music had been absorbed by our muscles, especially the obliques, and would go on propelling that uncontrollable back-and-forth hip-swaying forever. On the way up Bedford Street to Seventh Avenue, two guys overtook and passed us. When one was right next to him, Steven drew out under his breath in a reverent whisper, "*Disss*-co." He gave it the same whooshing, electronic sound as the feedback drone that lingered in our ears, muting the sounds of the early Sunday morning. The two men smiled knowingly. There was no question where all of us were coming from.
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> "It was *hot* tonight," Steven said. "It was really crazy, though. At first it was like that night at 12 West when we left so early. Creeps everywhere you looked, plaguing you. And you couldn't get into it. The lights were so bright, and the music was weird. Then all of a sudden the music got real hot, they turned off those bright lights, everything went red and blue, and everybody was gorgeous—just big, hot, butch muscle numbers. Suddenly it was a different night. Then, after that real hot set, the music had no beat. Remember, I kept asking you if the music had a beat. I couldn't get into it. And I couldn't tell if Bobby liked it or not, but he kept dancing. He's a little bopper, Bobby. He just bops around. He's hot. You discoed good, babe. It was real good disco. *Disss*-co."
>
> Steven's conversation is like that for at least a whole day after Saturday night disco. A running analysis of the night before, the night that's really morning, beginning about 1:00 a.m. and lasting until 7:00 or 8:00. Of course, that's not counting the preparation, which begins early Saturday. Getting your disco act together. Finding a member to go with. Eating lots of protein, but early in the day. Resting up. Deciding what drugs to take and what clothes to wear. The clothes are particularly important because, apart from

wanting the right look, you have to figure out how much you can comfortably shed or allow to get drenched in sweat without its bringing you down. At least until about 5:30, when nothing could bring you down. At that point the music is always good, there's plenty of room on the dance floor, and only the serious discoers are left. But best of all your body has quit resisting. It has unstoppable momentum. That is the one thing about disco comparable to any other experience. It's like what happens in distance running or swimming. You pass a point where you're beyond tired, beyond pain, beyond even thinking about stopping, thinking only that this could go on forever and you'd love it. It's pure ecstasy. Nothing matters but disco, and nothing—not sex, not food, not sleep, nothing—is better.

The place Steven and I had just come from is called Flamingo. One of the first and most elaborate of the new private dance clubs, Flamingo has been operating for two seasons. That is something of a longevity record for gay discos, which usually last only about six months before a new and better place to dance comes along. There are several reasons for Flamingo's staying power. One is that Michael Fesko, the owner, has a loyal following among the A-list gay crowd. And Fesko shrewdly closes the club every spring, just as the devotees begin to tire of the routine. Most of the Flamingo crowd spend their summer weekends on Fire Island anyway. But more important, membership at Flamingo is by invitation only, which guarantees the clubby atmosphere this crowd loves. The feeling that the club is special, exclusive, the *best,* is essential to a good disco. Membership costs $45/season; a member pays $5 at the door and his guests pay $7. What that gets you is juice, soda, coffee, fresh fruit, and stale doughnuts, which nobody much cares for. There's no liquor, and nobody cares about that at all. What the price of admission really gets you is the most perfect dancing environment yet, and the ingredients for that are very precarious.

Flamingo is located in a big, anonymous office/loft building on the northeast edge of SoHo, where on a Saturday night there's nobody else around. There's no sign in front, not even a lighted doorway. Going there for the first time feels like an initiation into a secret society. Gay men love the

> kinds of rituals that make what they do seem secretive, forbidden. (As if the whole world wouldn't realize Flamingo was there from the pulsating of the entire building—in fact, the building houses two discos; the other one is the Gallery—and the endless line of cabs pulling up in front from midnight to 6:00 a.m. New York taxi drivers could tell you a thing or two about forbidden places in New York.)
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> You walk through the uninviting entrance into a completely dark foyer where you can vaguely perceive that there are a few people shuffling around. Then a flashlight lights up and you put your membership card in its beam. You've passed the first test. You go through the doors at the back of the lobby to the stairway. There are two official-looking if a bit stoned attendants there to check your membership number off in a ledger, write down the number of guests with you (you're allowed two), and write out a bill—$19.00 for three. You then wait in line to go upstairs. This is the tensest part of the evening because you can hear the music from upstairs, and they're usually playing one of your favorite songs, so you know you'll miss dancing to it. At the top of the stairs, which are usually crowded with anxious, whispery guys, you pay your money and get your hand stamped with ink that glows under black light. Finally, you're in, but still not ready for the dance floor. There's another line at the coat check, which takes *forever,* because you have to decide there and then how much to take off, and there's a feverish shuffling of necessities from the pockets of shed clothing to pockets in what you're still wearing: joints of dust, poppers, inhaler, downs, cigarettes, matches, coke, coke spoon, ethyl chloride (if you're a rag queen). If you're smart, you do all of this at home, but that means making the difficult decisions before you've got the feel of the place.
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> The next problem is getting into it, but that's not usually severe. Sometimes when you arrive late the dance floor is so crowded that it's difficult to penetrate, and the energy level is already so high that it's alienating. There are people acting really wild, and ecstatic, and completely out of

The text ends there—at the bottom of a typewritten page, but not quite at the end of a line, so I don't think there's a page missing; I think I just stopped. The next page is the beginning of a brief history of disco:

> Discotheques are nothing new. They came in during the 1960s, when people realized that good dance music was too dependent on studio effects to be reproduced by a live band. They were part of that very brief episode when London—Kings Road and Chelsea especially—was synonymous with hip. They had names like Anabelle's and Arthur, and later the Electric Circus and Hippopotamus. They were private, or at least exclusive. They were expensive. They were straight. And now those places belong to bygone days.
>
> The new discotheques bear very little resemblance to those places. In fact, they aren't even heirs to that tradition. Flamingo, 12 West, Infinity, the Loft, and Frankenstein are gay. Their predecessors are different kinds of places, still in some ways reflected in the new discos. These include the Sanctuary, a late-1960s discotheque in an unused church on 43rd Street; the Firehouse, the headquarters of the Gay Activists' Alliance, whose engine house became a dance hall on weekends;[4] and the Tenth Floor, a private juice bar in a West 20s loft. What all of these places had in common are traits of pariah culture: they were located in out-of-the-way neighborhoods in quickly refurbished spaces with the palpable feeling of being susceptible to a bust at any moment. You always knew that their days were numbered, that they would be shut down by the law, burnt down, or just abandoned for a new and better place to dance.

And there are a few pages that suggest a more analytical project titled "Disco: Technologized Pleasure." One of these begins:

> What would it be like if we were able to somehow produce ecstasy synthetically? If we were able to just plug ourselves into a machine that would produce pleasure? Is ecstasy something that can exist in a pure state, apart from some interpersonal context, from a connection of the ecstatic moment with a whole matrix of feeling about, let's say, another person with whom that ecstasy might be linked?

Another begins:

> I want to describe the disco experience in a way that might convey what is extraordinary about it and also show how it

> is symptomatic of a wider experience of pleasure in our society, a mode of experience that is both terrifying and overwhelmingly powerful.
>
> When I first went to the new kind of discos a few years ago I was struck by the conformity of the people there, conformity that goes well beyond the stylistic similarities of people in a demimonde. It was not only a question of similar hairstyles or that everyone had the same mustache. The most striking aspect of the similarity was that these people have identical *bodies,* and these bodies are also strikingly different from other bodies. They seem as if honed for a particular activity, maybe a fairly athletic form of sex. In fact that activity is dancing, or what has become known as dancing. These bodies have been made into dancing machines.

Finally there are a few notes:

> Place: Synthetic materials, industrial gloss, futuristic, spacey, technologized surfaces and lighting. Enormous plants and bowls of fruit appear as if technologically produced, having no similarity to natural objects. Views through doorways to the outside world are extremely disturbing. Views of reality look unreal, nightmarish, tacky. Going outside is always a shock, and it takes days to readjust to ugly reality.
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> People: Synthetically produced bodies using body-building machines and protein supplements. Bodies moving en masse, like cogs in a machine.

What I wrote in 1975 or '76 seems fairly obvious now. If it has any interest, it's because it suggests that there was a time when this could have appeared so new and astonishing—and so peculiarly gay, which is what must have interested Guy Hocquenghem about it. The mention of "synthetically produced bodies" provides one clue as to why: Nautilus machines had just recently come into use. The innovation of the Nautilus was that it isolated a muscle group and, through the use of logarithmic spiral cam around which the chain is wrapped, made the load of weight on the muscles consistent through the entire range of exercise motion. This meant that energy expended in working out was used as efficiently as possible to produce results. Nowadays, of course, every decent health club has a great many brand-name variations of these workout machines, but in the 1960s and

The four photographs on these pages are by Alvin Baltrop (1948–2004), an African American photographer who photographed at the Hudson River piers along the west side of Manhattan from 1975 to 1986. They are reproduced here to illustrate Douglas Crimp's recollection of the "naturalness" of gay men's bodies during the early disco era, before the gay gym-culture craze. These portraits, clearly of men who agreed to pose for Baltrop at the piers, represent only one genre among Baltrop's thousands of pier photographs, which may also be voyeuristic, documentary, highly sexually explicit, comical, or purely architectural. For more information about Alvin Baltrop, see www.baltrop.org.

Alvin Baltrop, Untitled, 1975–86, © *The Alvin Baltrop Trust. Used with permission.*

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early 1970s, bodybuilding still consisted of simple calisthenics and using free weights and Universal stacked-weight machines, and serious bodybuilding was done only by a small subculture of competitors. Arnold Schwarzenegger was the first bodybuilder to become well known beyond the subculture—as a bodybuilder, that is, rather than as a sword-and-sandals movie actor like Steve Reeves or Mickey Hargitay. Schwarzenegger is one of the competition bodybuilders featured in Charles Gaines and George Butler's book *Pumping Iron,* published in 1974, and he became the star of the film of the same title, released in 1977. Sometime before writing the disco fragment I had become friendly with *New Yorker* humor writer Veronica Geng, who, among other quirky interests, was a follower of bodybuilding contests, and she had gotten to know Schwarzenegger and told me about him. Veronica was also a devotee of the New York City Ballet, to which she also introduced me, and she managed to combine her enthusiasm for these two types of bodies shaped by rigorous daily routines by introducing Schwarzenegger to City Ballet principal Peter Martins with the view to getting the dancer to assist the bodybuilder with his posing technique.

It was only around this time that large numbers of gay men began going to gyms. The gyms we went to were either YMCAs or hard-core bodybuilding clubs, since well-appointed fitness centers were still in the future. I joined the West Side Y in 1974; that's where I first encountered gay men whom I recognized from Flamingo pumping up their muscles on Nautilus machines.[5] If you compare the "natural" musculature on the guys in photographs of the 1970s New York gay scene, you'll see why I was so amazed at the "synthetically produced bodies," the "dancing machines" I saw at the disco. I remember vividly the first time I really took notice of a gay man with disproportionately large pectoral muscles. It was on Fire Island in the summer of 1973. He was a very good-looking guy named Frank, who always came shirtless to Tea Dance at the Boatel in the Pines, and my friends and I couldn't stop staring at or talking about his massive pecs. I guess I'd never before fully recognized the sexual appeal of that part of a man's anatomy; it took a chest overdeveloped by weight training to make me focus on it so fetishistically. Within a short five years, sculpted pectoral muscles had become one of the main attributes of gay male desirability, and Flamingo institutionalized the fact. Toward the conclusion of his history of 1970s disco, *Love Saves the Day,* Tim Lawrence writes that Flamingo had begun "being driven by an increasingly high dose of self-absorption."

> The launch of the first annual "Tetas" (Spanish for "tit") contest—a variation of the female topless dance—in October 1978 confirmed the drive toward vanity and bodily dis-

> play, with the chest reigning in the new temples of butch, and the following month Nathan Fain noted that Flamingo members "can barely stand how handsome they are, the first confirmed case of group narcissism on record."[6]

Gay men's overdeveloped breasts eventually came to be described as "disco tits."

My project on disco—such as it was—was probably an attempt to work through my ambivalence about the new scene. I wasn't a member at Flamingo, I didn't measure up to its standard of physical beauty, and I felt excluded by its cliquishness and conformity. But I was also attracted to some of the guys I thought did meet the standard, and I felt happy to be there when I found a member to go with. Most of all, I had always loved to dance, starting with fifth-grade ballroom dance classes; intensifying during my junior high school years, when I learned to jitterbug with my older sister's friends; intensifying still more when I easily picked up all the 1960s dance crazes from the twist and the watusi to line dances like the hully gully (which would serve me well for learning the hustle during my disco days); and intensifying most of all when the music, in the hands of the DJ, seemed to make my body move as if by remote control and manipulate my mood in ever-increasing rushes of pleasure. Of course, this latter phase of dance loving was enhanced by drugs—everything from acid to angel dust, a tranquilizer so powerful and spatially disorienting that it was wise while high on it to stay in one place on the dance floor. (The "rag queens" I mention in the fragment on disco are what we called the guys who used ethyl chloride; they would soak a handkerchief in the chemical anesthetic and each put one end of it in his mouth to get high. You can see this in one of the disco sequences of William Friedkin's 1980 film, *Cruising*.)

Drugs—always hard on me—were probably the major cause of my ambivalence. I'm one of those people made edgy and paranoid instead of mellow by pot. On an acid trip I hallucinated being in the middle of a forest fire. Heroin made me throw up. Speed made me feel great for an hour and crash for twenty-four. Once, a group of us on Fire Island took mescaline before going into the water to play in the surf, got caught in a rip current, and just barely saved ourselves from drowning. I was tripping on hallucinogenic mushrooms at a party in LA when the police raided it. I took way too many drugs during the late 1960s and 1970s. I took them alone, with friends and boyfriends, at parties, for sex, for the "experience," but most of all I took them for disco. You can't really give yourself over to serious discoing without drugs. You need the incredible level of energy they give the illusion of supplying, and you need their disinhibiting quality to allow the music's beat

to take over your body, inhabit it, make it move with no sense of volition. Without drugs, disco can be fun, but only just fun.

But probably because I was trying to get serious about being an art critic right at the time I became a disco bunny, I resisted disinhibition. I fought the effect of the drugs I took. I *thought* at the disco. I thought, "Why are all these grown-up men acting like excited children? Why do I like this so much? How will I feel about this tomorrow?" Recently I read a passage in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* that resonated perfectly with my disco experience. It's not about drugs or dancing, it's about sex, but the analogy works perfectly:

> Some people can have sex and really let their minds go blank and fill up with the sex; other people can never let their minds go blank and fill up with the sex, so while they're having the sex they're thinking, "Can this really be me? Am I really doing this? This is very strange. Five minutes ago I wasn't doing this. In a little while I won't be doing it. What would Mom say? How did people ever think of doing this?" So the first type of person—the type that can let their minds go blank and fill up with sex and not-think-about-it—is better off. The other type has to find something else to relax with and get lost in.[7]

I tried to resolve my disco ambivalence not by finding something else but by changing venues. I stopped going to Flamingo and shifted my loyalty to 12 West, which was a bit less A-list and a bit more diverse. Later I occasionally went to Paradise Garage, which was way more diverse, but by the time the Garage opened in 1978, I had started graduate school and become the managing editor of *October,* and the demands of course work and running a quarterly journal interfered with my disco routine. Eventually I pretty much stopped going to the big, fabulous gay discos. I realized that in many ways I preferred the grungy little gay bars that had dance floors, like Crisco Disco and the Cock Ring. I could go at a more convenient hour any night of the week, never have to stand in line to get in, pay no admission, and still dance to music mixed by some of the best DJs spinning in New York. And unlike the "real" discos, the patrons of these places were into more than just dancing, which meant that my night often ended with one of them in my bed. Maybe I took Warhol's advice "to find something else to relax with and get lost in" after all.

The clearest sign to me that my disco project stemmed from my ambivalence is that I described Flamingo instead of 12 West. I thought of 12 West as *my* disco during my serious disco days, which in memory seem to stretch over the entire decade of the 1970s but really must have consisted of the few

years from 1974 to 1977. Twelve West had a dance floor not only bigger than Flamingo's but also much better designed. It was a square inscribed in another square, with triangular, stepped, carpeted platforms on three sides of the dance floor (the fourth triangle that would have completed the square was only implied by the other three; it was actually a continuation of the dance floor that gave onto the entrance lobby in one direction and a juice bar and lounge area in the other). You could stand and dance in place on the platforms and look out over the dance floor at its sea of moving bodies, spotting friends or the attractive stranger you'd noticed earlier dancing next to you. At Flamingo, by contrast, the dance floor occupied one end of a long, narrow loft. It was approachable from only one side, and when the place was crowded there was never enough space between the side walls and the dance floor to make moving around it possible. The platforms at 12 West gave you options. You could fully immerse yourself in the thick of dancing bodies, or you could stand slightly above and apart and take in the beauty of the multitude moving as one while dancing in place to the same beat.

Another thing I liked about 12 West was that there were skylights above the dance floor, so when dancing 'til dawn you actually got to experience the dawn. I think this reduced the shock of moving from the synthetic, strobe-lit world of the disco to the diurnal streets outside. Day slowly broke over the dance floor, the crowd thinned, you danced a last dance or two, and as the sun really began to pour into the room you saw that your surroundings weren't so magical after all but just an old industrial space, and you were happy enough to return to your regular life.[8] The song I remember as my all-time disco favorite—Esther Phillips's disco cover of Dinah Washington's blues hit "What a Diff'rence a Day Makes"—dates from when I began going to 12 West; reprised at dawn, the lyric might have been "What a diff'rence *day* makes." I was certainly being hyperbolic when I wrote in the fragment that it took "days to adjust to ugly reality." Regular hours, jobs and other quotidian responsibilities, and being surrounded by ordinary, mostly straight people who had no appreciation of the intensities of pleasure that disco afforded did take some adjustment, and it did take time for even a young, physically fit body to recover from staying out all night, taking drugs, and dancing for eight hours at a stretch with rarely more than a fifteen-minute break. But by early- to midweek I'd be back in the swim and looking forward to next weekend's dance party.

The Steven of the fragment is Steven Butow, who was my regular disco buddy. I don't remember for sure how or when we met, but I think it was probably through David, a mutual friend I'd picked up for sex and remained friends with until he was body-snatched by est. Steven was part of the Baltimore crowd around John Waters (he played Lieutenant Grogan in

Desperate Living), and we sometimes went dancing in a group that variously included Divine (in his Glen Milstead guise), Cookie Mueller, David Lochary, and Van Smith. Steven and I occasionally slept together, but our bond was really about dancing. He worked as an illustrator for Butterick Patterns, and I was teaching at the School of Visual Arts and struggling to find my voice as a critic. We rarely saw each other during the week and had little in common beyond our disco companionship. But to that we were extremely faithful. Having a dance partner who wasn't a boyfriend worked well for disco: it kept the emotional experience musical and communal, uncomplicated by the petty jealousies that come with lovers who are just as attracted as you are to the guys dancing nearby. If Steven said, "Let's go dance next to Bobby—he's hot," I thought, Sure, let's. And Steven or I could wander off and dance with whomever we pleased, knowing that we'd find our way back to each other soon enough and always be there at the end of the night to leave together. I don't think there was ever a time when either of us went home with someone else. "Dance partner" doesn't mean the same thing for disco as it does for, say, Fred and Ginger. With disco at its best, dancing is both individual and collective. You might connect with the stranger dancing next to you at a given moment, but it's not a couples thing; it's boogie intimacy, which can be very intense and sexy, but it's usually limited to dancing together for a while before each of you dissolves back into the crowd or returns to your "partner."

In this respect the innovations of disco mirrored the ethos of gay liberation regarding the expansion of affectional possibility. Coupling was newly seen not as a "happily ever after" compact, but as an in-the-moment union for sharing pleasure. Such pleasure sharing could, of course, lead to all kinds of longer-term relationships: now-and-again casual sex partners, regular fuck buddies, cruising comrades, bar and bathhouse companions, just plain friends, and combinations of any of these and many more. But it didn't have to lead to anything at all. Pleasure was its own reward; it didn't require redemption through "love" or "commitment" or even an exchange of phone numbers. Moreover, two stopped being a magic number: coupling could easily be multiplied to become a three-way, a foursome, group sex. Bathhouses had "orgy rooms," steam rooms, and saunas for those who wanted more than one partner at a time and who might also want a little voyeurism and/or exhibitionism in the mix or the total anonymity of sex in the dark with bodies detached from personhood. The liberation ethos developed into a new sexual culture, and that culture fed into the new dance scene. It's not surprising that one of the earliest gay dance parties in New York happened at a bathhouse: the Continental Baths introduced disco in 1970.

I never went there. I missed out on Bette Midler's legendary performances. I never went to the Loft or the Gallery. I never danced at the Ice Palace in

Cherry Grove. I didn't go to the Garage as often as I now wish I had. I went only once, by invitation, to Studio 54 but hated its "you-can-come-in-but-you-can't" door policy and found it dull once I got inside. Obviously, I wasn't there for one of the big occasions. I found the Saint exciting more as a brilliantly designed environment than as a place to dance. And the lure of the sex taking place in the balcony above the dance floor's domed scrim confounded my notion that a truly great disco was meant to make sex redundant, at least on the night you went dancing.

I never skated at the Roxy, even though I had been early to take up roller disco. I had a crush on a French dancer, a gorgeous straight guy named Daniel, who introduced me to it. Having been a roller skater in my teens, I was game to go with him to the old Empire Rollerdrome in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, where roller disco is said to have started. We were usually the only white boys there,[9] and though good skaters we were seriously outclassed by the regulars, who skate-danced double-time to the pounding disco music and flashing strobe lights. Sometimes they formed long chains by grabbing one another around the waist. The men were so fierce that women weren't allowed on the floor with them except during occasional "couples skates" to music with a slower beat. Otherwise it was either "women's skate" or "men's skate," with the non-skating sex hanging out in a fenced area in the middle of the rink. One fateful night skating at Empire just after Christmas in 1978 I was unintentionally clipped from behind, my legs went out from under me, and I fell—hard. I blacked out and only came to when I was on my feet again, having been scooped up by one of the floor monitors. There I was, stunned, standing in the middle of the rink with skaters zooming past me. Somehow I managed to push myself to the side of the rink with all my weight on my left leg, the only one that would support me. Although it took awhile for me to admit it to myself, I had broken my hip. By the time we called 911 and got an ambulance, I was in excruciating pain. I was taken to the medical facility nearest the Empire Rollerdrome, X-rayed, shot full of morphine, and, since I had no health insurance, sent to a ward with fifteen other guys. Within several years of going bankrupt and closing, Brooklyn Jewish Hospital was a pretty forlorn place. When I woke up early the next morning to the sound of boomboxes, there were cops hovering over my ward mates, most of whom were handcuffed to their bed frames while they recovered from gunshot wounds. I was unfazed: I was flying on morphine, which I guess is the only drug I've ever taken that made me feel just fine. Eventually I was transferred to Cornell Medical Center for orthopedic surgery to pin my hip. For the next six weeks I was on crutches and, owing to an especially icy winter, more or less confined to my apartment.

I spent that confinement rewriting my essay "Pictures" for *October*. It was very slow going, no doubt in part because my usual work routine was disrupted by being unable to go out to the Cock Ring at the end of the evening to reward myself with a little dancing and maybe a trick. The more serious reason was the difficulty of clarifying the inchoate ideas I'd formulated in the catalog of *Pictures,* the modest group show I'd put together for Artists Space in 1977. For that original essay, written a year and a half earlier, I attempted to apply the linguistic and poststructuralist theory I had been reading. The theory was new to me, and so was the artwork, but both were "about" representation and thus seemed related. For the 1978 version, I returned to the notion of *postmodernism* that I now realize I had come up with a few years earlier for the book proposal that shared a file folder these past thirty-odd years with my disco fragment. This required an about-face: I concluded the 1977 essay by saying that "the self-reflexiveness and formalism of recent art appear to have been abandoned, as are interests in the specific characteristics of a medium. . . . It would be a mistake, however, to think of this [new, *Pictures*] work as effecting a complete break with recent art, or with modernism as a whole." The same turn away from medium specificity led me to the opposite conclusion in the 1979 version: "If *postmodernism* is to have theoretical value, it cannot be used merely as another chronological term; rather it must disclose the particular nature of a breach with modernism. It is in this sense that the radically new approach to mediums is important."

What did it mean that the group of young artists who came to be known as the "pictures generation" hung out at the Mudd Club? The Mudd Club opened in Tribeca in the fall of 1978, and I went there occasionally because they did—and I hated it. It was one of the principal venues of the "disco sucks" backlash. The dance everyone did was called the spastic. It's one of the only dances I could never learn to do.

—University of Rochester

NOTES

1. A British graduate student recently e-mailed me to ask how I came to characterize the artists in my 1977 Artists Space exhibition, *Pictures,* as "postmodernist" in the revised version of the catalog essay published in *October* in 1979. Since I hadn't used that term in the original essay, he wondered, what had transpired in the meantime? When had I begun to think about postmodernism? Was it through my association with other *October* critics, such as Craig Owens? Did I take the term from architectural discourse, where by 1978 it was used fairly regularly? I couldn't remember. But now, reading my book project dating from 1975 or '76, I find the word *postmodernism*.

2. Guy Hocquenghem, *Le Désir homosexuel* (Paris: Jean-Pierre Delarge, 1972), translated into English by Daniella Dangoor, preface by Jeffrey Weeks (London: Allison & Busby,

1978); reprinted with an introduction by Michael Moon (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

3. Guy Hocquenghem, *L'Après-mai des faunes: Volutions* (Paris: Grasset, 1974); *Fin de section* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1975); *Love in Relief,* trans. M. Whistler (New York: Seahorse Press, 1986); *Le Gay voyage: guide et regard homosexuels sur les grandes métropoles* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1980). For more on Hocquenghem, see Bill Marshall, *Guy Hocquenghem: Beyond Gay Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

4. Richie Rivera, who had DJed at the Firehouse, became one of the DJs at Flamingo in 1977 after having worked in the interim at the Sandpiper in Fire Island Pines and at the Anvil in New York.

5. "Almost every YMCA in America has a weight room, and all of the ones I know about (with a few exceptions, like the big Y on Central Park West where the faggots will track you to the shower with their heads down like they were following a spoor) are wonderful places to train" (Charles Gaines, *Pumping Iron: The Art and Sport of Bodybuilding* [New York: Simon and Shuster, 1974], 27–28). The homophobia here is typical of the book's text, no doubt as a reaction formation, but here from the book's preface is the stated reason:

> Almost since its beginnings here [in the United States], bodybuilding has advertised itself with consummate tackiness, confining itself to the back pages of pulp magazines and, in the national consciousness, to the same shadowy corners occupied by dildos and raincoat exhibitionists. Unflattering myths developed early here. And the composite picture that seems to have emerged from them, of bodybuilders as narcissistic, coordinatively helpless muscleheads with suspect sexual preferences, has done little to promote the sport. Part of what we have tried to do is to demonstrate that this is an inaccurate picture (8).

6. Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970–1979* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 424. Lawrence quotes Nathan Fain writing at the time in *After Dark.* Flamingo's choice of "tetas" rather than "pecs" for the name of its annual contest suggests that something more than the chest was being fetishized: Latino men. Andrew Holleran's 1978 novel, *Dancer from the Dance,* makes this explicit.

7. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (from A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1975), 48–49.

8. Evidently others disagreed with my assessment of the effect of the skylights:

> Back in the Village, the owners of 12 West discovered that they were having their own problems maintaining the "cloak of nonthreatening anonymity" that was so important to gay men who were in the club but not quite out of the closet. "We couldn't stay open too early [*sic*] because we had light coming through the skylight," says owner Alan Harris. "People would also begin to look very *gray* at eight in the morning." Consequently the club started to close its doors at five, with [DJ] Tom Savarese winding up an hour later. "Tom would stop promptly at six o'clock and go into a set of encores that would begin to bring the crowd down. That was when the sound of sleaze started to come into play. People just hung over one another, and then they would put on their sunglasses, stroll out of the club, and go for breakfast or additional acts." (Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day,* 234)

9. I recently learned that during his residency at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in 1978, German photographer Thomas Struth also frequented the Empire Rollerdrome.