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THE ART OF PISS

What I admire about Andres Serrano's iconic "Piss Christ"—the photograph in which a small plastic crucifix is suspended in a jar of amber fluid—is how seriously it takes urine as an aesthetic medium. Serrano made piss into art by disclosing the beauty pooling latent in what commonly is regarded as waste. Viewing "Piss Christ" as sacrilegious, Serrano's detractors miss not only the aesthetic but also the sacralizing dimension of urine. His art disrespects Christianity only if you equate piss with filth—which Serrano emphatically does not and we need not. Why has it been so hard to see how "Piss Christ" recodes bodily fluid as potentially sacred? Serrano's crucifix is not drowning in excrement but rather illuminating urine's beauty.

The beauty of piss lies in its tracing a visible arc of connection between the human body and the world. As such, piss activates an ever-renewing field of relations between my body and all the others, human and non-human, organic as well as inorganic. The art of piss consists in giving form to relations that typically dissolve before their virtuality may be registered. Technologies of modern hygiene stand arrayed as the enemy of piss aesthetics, even as they create spaces of seclusion in which piss relations occasionally take shape. To appreciate those relations, we need

better descriptions of what goes on in the water closet. *Piss and flush* is but a cover story, an alibi of the autonomous subject.

This alibi is maintained by disgust, our primary affective defense against the aesthetics and erotics of piss. For example, in a *New York Times* review of *That's Disgusting*, a useful book on the psychology of disgust by Rachel Herz, the reviewer proffers the erotics of piss as an instance of the quintessentially, if not universally, revolting. "The things almost everyone finds disgusting are usually the things that would cause harm if eaten or touched. *That's why seeing a pornographic image involving urination, or sitting on the subway near someone spewing loud, wet coughs, will almost certainly gross you out.*" This reviewer does not pause to consider why an image should be found as disturbing as physical proximity to viral particles; conjuring the prospect of pleasure in urine is all the evidence deemed necessary. An image of piss porn is sufficient, from the normative perspective, to guarantee recoil. Yet, as a fluid that is sterile when it leaves the body, urine is unlikely to "cause harm if eaten or touched." It is merely our culturally conditioned response of disgust that makes piss appear as dirty or dangerous.

Luckily the barrier of disgust remains quite permeable to piss. Plenty of people—men, women, and children—take pleasure in doing things with piss besides getting rid of it as quickly as possible. The first time I attended Yellow Hanky Night, a monthly event at Blow Buddies in San Francisco, I anticipated that the sex club would be half empty, populated by only the most ardent aficionados of what is categorized—by gay men and psychiatrists alike—as a fetish. (What these different groups mean by the term *fetish* is, of course, quite different.) How many piss artists would turn out on a Wednesday night, I wondered, imagining myself simply as "piss-curious" as I headed south of Market Street.

The club was busier than I'd ever seen it, with hundreds of men crowding in for the action. Young and old, gorgeous and ordinary, men of all races and sizes milled around the club's spacious rooms and plywood cubicles, happily recycling the golden fluid. Not having a liquor license, Blow Buddies is usually booze free; on Yellow Hanky Night, however, patrons are encouraged to bring their own beer, which gets checked behind the counter along with whatever clothing you wish to discard from the outset. Men are drinking beer or water, and no-one is using the toilets for urination. Tonight we have human toilets. Signs saying "recycling station" or "recycle here" are placed prominently about, to encourage consumption of other men's waters. Expecting the majority of the action to consist in men pissing on each other, I was surprised by how dramatically bottoms outnumbered tops and how much of the piss action remained essentially invisible: placing their mouths next to glory holes, men wait for others to stick their cocks through the wooden hole so that they may drink directly from the source while sucking.

The term "golden showers," a euphemism for the practice of men or women peeing on each other as a sign of domination, is mostly out of place here. The impression I gleaned at Buddies is that men who are drinking other men's piss while blowing them are experiencing sustenance, not humiliation. For piss bottoms, urine is a precious fluid, not waste, and they want as much of it as they can get. To let another guy drink your piss is an act of generosity; you are feeding him. I'm writing about this now because folks who haven't participated in piss play have virtually no idea of what it involves or how it's experienced. If you regard piss purely as waste, then urinating onto or into another human being invariably appears as a hostile act. But if you see the beauty in urine, then piss play becomes cleansing, even sacramental.

Certainly piss can be used as an instrument of domination or punishment—as it is, for example, in Annie Proulx’s “*Brokeback Mountain*,” the story on which Ang Lee’s movie was based. When Ennis Del Mar visits Jack Twist’s parents in the wake of Jack’s death, he recalls Jack’s telling him how once, as a kid, he was “hosed down” by his father to teach the child a lesson about toilet aim. A pivotal moment in the story and in Jack’s history, this is the only scene that did not make it into the film adaptation of “*Brokeback Mountain*.” Critics who praise Ang Lee’s fidelity to Proulx’s text neglect to mention the omission of this vital scene. Is it purely sexual sadism that makes one long to see Jake Gyllenhaal on the receiving end of a vigorous golden shower? What kind of gay film would *Brokeback Mountain* have been with the piss scene intact?

Mainstream audiences may be ready to accept same-sex love—and they definitely are happy to embrace the prospect of gay identity—well before they’re ready for the aesthetics or erotics of piss. Gay identity is so marketable because it seals off queerness into safely autonomous units, whereas piss is a sign of connection that destroys the fiction of autonomy. Your fluids inside me become my fluids that I offer for recycling into you. Our bodies become porous to each other through the medium of piss. And that is why piss play is both sexually exciting and a provocation to ethics: Piss dramatizes my porosity to the other, whereas disgust seals me off from connection with other bodies. Disgust consolidates my identity by erecting barriers against others’ materiality.

Blow Buddies reserves a space, called Whiz World, for piss play every Saturday night. Centered on a large bathtub, Whiz World is where you can bathe in piss—as long as piss tops oblige with their precious fluids. The first time I entered Whiz World, I discovered that a full bladder is insufficient for participation: one

first must overcome a certain inhibition about pissing on another person, no matter how much he's clamoring for it. Our bodies have incorporated cultural lessons about the regulation of urine that cannot be unlearned instantaneously; piss play takes practice. Sphincters require training before they yield to pleasure. Once you get the hang of it, though, it is a joy to offer a long, strong arc of urine to a grateful supplicant. Hosing him down is not a punishment but a gift.

Various men have tutored me in the art of piss, but one who stands out is the guy at Buddies who made me his piss bottom. This was an arena of experimentation in which I was exclusively top, happy to give but unwilling to receive. That evening, near the end of Yellow Hanky Night, an older man whose face was shaded by the visor of a leather cap led me into the backyard area to play around for a while. Having drunk so much beer and water over the course of the evening, and having relieved my bladder so many times, I must have been more relaxed than usual. Drawing me into the shadows, the man in the leather cap pushed me to my knees, encouraging me to work his soft cock through the mesh of his jockstrap. My mouth registered that the jockstrap was already damp, and when I became aware that he was gently pissing through the jock, the tasteless warm fluid flooding my lips, I spontaneously ejaculated. Both his piss and my body's response took me completely by surprise. I did not consent—and would not have consented—to being pissed on; yet I loved it. That night the man in the leather cap, whose face I never saw, gave me the gift of erotic astonishment.

Gay writer Sam Steward records several scenes, in his Phil Andros novels, of non-consensual piss play. He and his partner are lying in a state of post-ejaculatory bliss, with the other guy's dick still inside him, when the narrator describes a sensation of being flooded from within and realizing that, without asking per-

mission, the man who has just cum in his ass is now emptying his bladder there too. This works as a powerful enema; the desire to release one's bowels quickly becomes overwhelming. Some men love the cleansing effect of this erotic practice, though they usually also like fair warning that a piss enema may be in the cards.

It is worth emphasizing that piss play often happens when cocks are not hard; it can be a way of having sex without an erection. If you think that sex always means fucking, then piss play will appear as a "paraphilia" (as *DSM* designates it), a substitute for, or side dish to, what should be the main course. But I view piss as a way of extending eros beyond the fuck and of sharing pleasure without needing a hard-on. Perhaps piss is a non-phallic form of sex among men. It involves an exchange of body fluids that evoke, yet remain distinct from, semen. In this way, piss play multiplies the occasions for fluid exchange and extends the sphere of bodily intimacy. Even men who cum three or four times a night can piss more often and with greater volume. While urine tends to be culturally coded as lesser than semen, it easily makes a more spectacular money shot.

This suggests a compensatory motive, a kind of pragmatics of piss—they're doing it only because they can't get hard or because male ejaculation appears anticlimactic. I think this misses the point of piss. It misses the relationality generated by recycling fluids and it overlooks the particular form of cleansing that paradoxically inhabits piss play. When you have been showered by and consumed a sufficiently large volume of urine, you begin to feel exceptionally clean. This paradox is captured best by Samuel Delany, the literary master of the art of piss. Novels such as *Hogg*, *The Mad Man*, and Delany's most recent, *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*, feature enough piss play to satisfy the most enthusiastic fan. But a scene in *The Mad Man*—in which the protagonist, John Marr, spends an evening at New York's notorious

Mineshaft on Wet Night—describes more vividly than anything I've ever read how drinking huge amounts of urine can have a purifying effect by flushing out one's entire system.

Delany's Marr, a budding philosopher and impromptu detective, discovers the joys of piss through a descent into experience. His knowledge of piss is exemplary because it is acquired through initiation. He learns less by reading than by doing; his consciousness expands as his body is flooded and, like other characters in Delany's fiction, he accesses pleasures that depend on overcoming the barriers of disgust. What's striking about Delany's descriptions of piss is that he tends to present it as par for the course rather than as transgressive, fetishistic, or a matter of thwarting repulsion. His characters appear oblivious to disgust, even as he must be aware that his readers most certainly are not. Readers willingly suspend disbelief where they will not suspend their feelings of disgust. Conversely, fiction—especially science fiction—allows an author to get his characters to do things that it would be much harder to get people to do in real life. The awareness that someone will be disgusted by the sexual use of urine forms part of any piss scenario as an inevitable backdrop to the action. You need the possibility of recoil on the horizon for piss to produce pleasure.

As with most bodily fluids, piss bears an ambiguity that our culture prefers to resolve without hesitation. Coded as dirty, urine may cleanse; coded as waste, it is valued as precious by piss aficionados; coded as repulsive, its luminous beauty was dramatically revealed by Serrano. This common substance encodes a double valence that makes piss aesthetics and piss erotics conceivable in the first place. To do anything with piss besides flushing it away gives that doubleness time to breathe, raising questions where there was supposed to be only a foregone conclusion. What else might you do with your piss? (What else might you do with your life?) How might we handle bodily fluids outside the regime of

fascist hygienicism? What would it mean to piss together rather than apart—to piss in common? Pissing together, without urinary segregation, what kind of communal relations might become apparent?

Outside the United States public men's rooms regularly feature a trough in place of individual urinals. Where men are encouraged to piss together, their arcs of urine flowing side by side into a common reservoir, the trough becomes a site of masculine bonding. Whether that bonding intensifies misogyny or homoerotics is a matter of context and contingency; dynamics at the trough veer off in various directions. I have found that shifting ever so slightly the angle of one's stance or the vector of one's jet serves as a handy invitation for urinary intimacy. It does not take much to get the other guy to move his fingers into the arc of your stream; additional encouragement occasionally gets him to lean over for a taste. Sharing piss with a stranger in this way is a lovely acknowledgement of our common porosity. It's worth remembering that whatever sex happens in public men's rooms, it invariably begins with piss.

Here and there you find a man whose commitment to the communal joys of piss is such that he takes to wallowing in the trough. For example, Barry Charles—better known as “Troughman”—is regarded as a countercultural hero in Australia for his habit of lying in troughs at public events such as Mardi Gras. “My specialty is being pissed on,” he happily declares in *Troughman*, a short documentary film by Kellie Henneberry about this cult figure. Like Delany's fictional protagonist John Marr, Barry Charles describes coming to piss play at New York's Mineshaft, on a night in 1978 when he ventured into the piss tub and played there until dawn. Returning to Sydney, he figured out how to reproduce this experience in less specialized gay bars and clubs by climbing into the trough to serve as a human urinal.

“One of the most sensational things about doing this is when I look up into the faces of guys who may never have [pissed on anyone] before and see their smiles as they find the pleasure and the excitement of this illicit activity.” Troughman has become famous in Australia for sharing the discovery of pleasure in the everyday act of urination. Bladder relief transmutes into eros.

On an ordinary evening at Blow Buddies in 2001, long before I'd ever heard of Troughman, I walked into the bathroom to find a handsome man stretched out half naked in the communal urinal. Unless you ventured into a stall, there was nowhere to piss without pissing on him. Nobody else was around and I got the impression that this man had been waiting for some time. It wasn't Yellow Hanky night and perhaps his presence had startled other patrons. Fortunately, my bladder was very full and I was delighted to oblige him. I pissed all over his muscled torso, his face and hair, and into his crotch, where the man was frantically working his cock. When he sensed that my bladder was almost empty, the man shot his load, adding semen to the waters pooling in the ridges of his abdomen. Then, with a few words of appreciation and a wide grin, he climbed out of the trough. Unlike his Australian counterpart, he wasn't going to stay there all night.

Making a gift of what I had imagined was waste, the man in the trough showed me a wonderful time. He also showed me the meaning of that extravagantly Duchampian solicitation that these days frequently appears online if you know where to look: *I will be your toilet.*