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Spirituality L.A.: A Directory

LA WEEKLY

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and the return of desire

by doug sadownick

gays and the return of desire

In front of a standing-room-only house at Highways last month, performance artist Annie Sprinkle opened her legs and applied a vibrator to her vagina. She spent much of her performance talking about the two women who live inside her: Ellen Steinberg (her given name), a nice Jewish girl, and Annie Sprinkle (her stage name), a post-porn modernist slut. "Ellen was fat and ugly," Sprinkle explained, "and no one seemed to want her. Annie is voluptuous and sexy, and a lot of people want her."



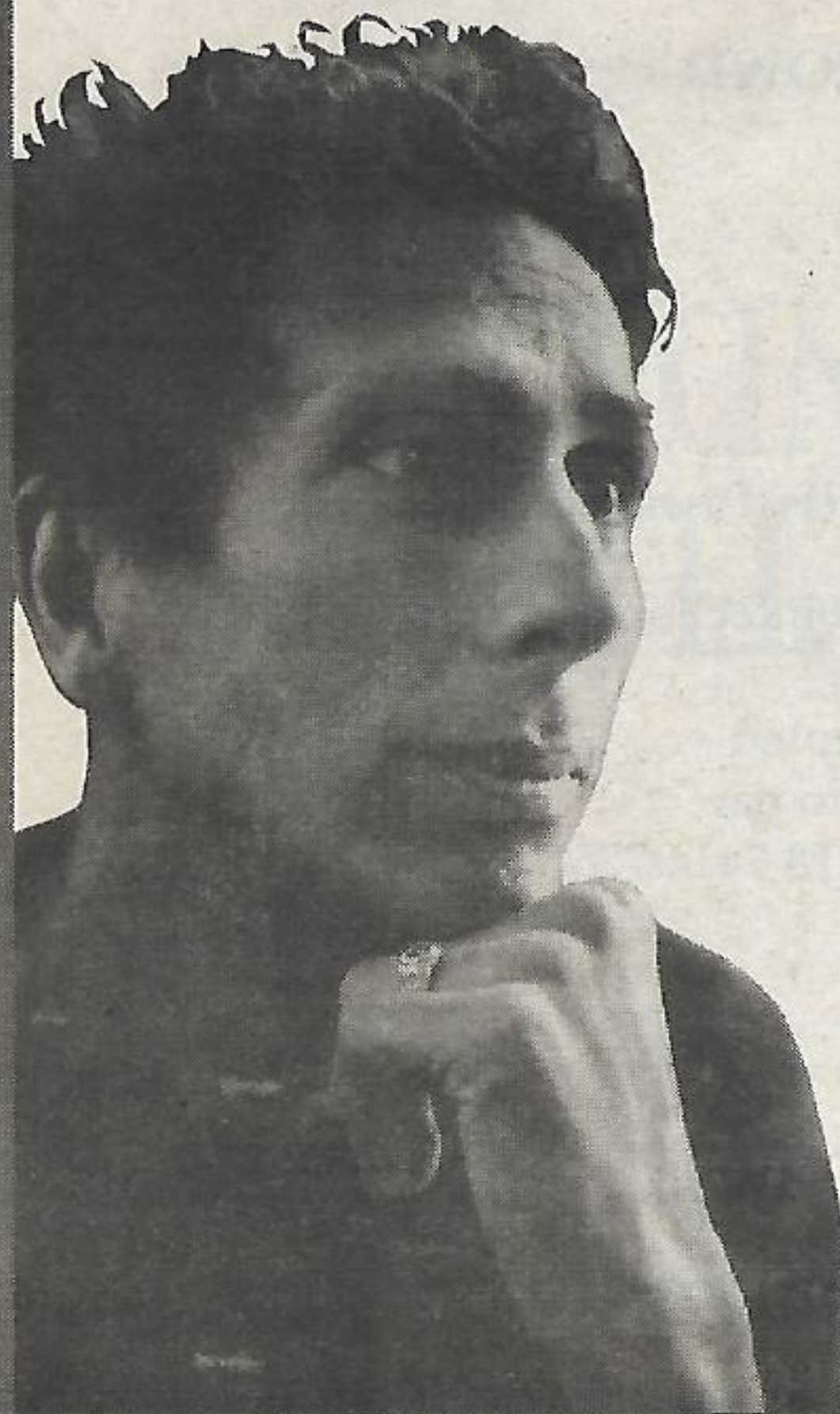
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Now she was revealing a third persona: Anya, a temple goddess who believes that the return of the Dionysian to our Apollonian age can rehabilitate our cities, never mind unleash a potent orgasm. For Sprinkle, who has worked much of her life as a prostitute and porn star, sex should be more than about sex — it should be the ultimate healing force in life, "an erotic energy." She asked the audience to breathe with her, teaching the bemused crowd the ABCs of tantra. Surrounded by large candles, she breathed rhythmically into a mike, inviting the audience to use her as a projection screen — "as whore, goddess, whatever." The audience shook rattles to the drum music blasting from the speakers. Within 10 minutes, Sprinkle reached orgasm.

The audience was made up of feminists, straight couples, artists and skeptics ("Do you think she really came?" a man asked a friend). But the most unlikely, and even ardent, group was composed of gay men, some of whom stood up to dance and breathe along with Sprinkle. As several later admitted, they were turned on, finding — to their astonishment — a sexual affinity with Sprinkle.

The response to Sprinkle from the gay men surprised onlookers. This wasn't the way it — whatever *it* was — was supposed to work. Gay men, after all, are supposed to have sex with men, and straights with people of the opposite sex. Maybe. After a decade of terror induced by a disease that is sexually transmitted, all kinds of people are reimagining sex again. And, for the first time since the onslaught of AIDS, sex is a hot topic again in the gay community.

In the last three years, Los Angeles has witnessed the emergence of dozens of sex networks, the most prominent being the OBoys!, a group of young men who regularly conduct safe-sex parties. The Zone,



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(Left)
Michael Callen:
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In the last three years, Los Angeles has witnessed the emergence of dozens of sex networks, the most prominent being the OBoys!, a group of young men who regularly conduct safe-sex parties. The Zone, established in 1990, is the first new gay sex club to open in 10 years in L.A. Its success led to the opening of other such clubs, including Mondo Penis and the Ring. And for the first time in anyone's memory, several lesbian sex clubs have begun in the city. Nothing epitomizes the change in attitudes over the last decade more than the notice Zone owner Peter Deep posted at the front door: "You have entered a Fun Club. You and your partner may be approached by others wishing to share your experiences. This is considered normal behavior and should be treated as such . . . If this seems rude, then you are invited to either change your attitude or find another club. We will not tolerate anti-social behavior. Love yourself. Be friendly. Be nice."

Perhaps the most surprising development, though, has been the sexual experimenting between gays and lesbians. "It seemed natural that bumping on the boulevards would result in some of us bumping in the bedrooms," says Mark Thompson, a member of Black Leather Wings, a gay and lesbian group that explores sex and ritual. "While this is far from a universal occurrence, it's happening with far greater regularity than most might suspect." For a few months this winter, Thompson, along with Jim Curtan, a teacher with the Berkeley-based Body Electric School of Massage, and sex healer Matt Silverstein, took part in a "counsel of men," which treated sex as an organizing method. "Ecstasy is a birthright," says Curtan, "but most people need to learn this from scratch."

Last year, former L.A. City AIDS coordinator Dave Johnson organized monthly meetings on gay male intimacy that, to people's amazement, drew hundreds. "It's possible to be erotically connected to any man," says Johnson. "They don't have to be models. It's a matter of willingness." And one of the best-selling gay erotic videos in the gay community has been L.A. theater director Neil Tucker's *Hin Yin*. Utilizing porn-perfect models, it subverts porn's orgasm-driven ethos by emphasizing the use of massage and meditation.

To some observers, including many gay observers, these activities hardly constitute a new sexual revolution, but a series of curious acts engaged in by a minority of a minority. But for many

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the new sex radicals





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DEBRA DIPAOLO

sex radicals

others, this renewed emphasis on the body represents nothing short of a new stage in gay and lesbian culture's sexual politics. At the heart of the emerging debate are questions that could redefine the definitions of "gay," "lesbian" and "straight."

What exactly is sex — and how does it differ from Sprinkle's "erotic energy"? Do gays have sex more than heterosexuals, or are they just better at talking about it? Why has the gay and lesbian movement, in seeking a call for equal rights, kept sex in its political closet? In a word, is gay or straight America ready for a philosophy that addresses sex as a fundamental concern, no less vital than one's eating habits, purchases and career choices?

About 90 naked men stand about in a West Hollywood living room. Jesus and Mary Chain is on the stereo. There's party fare — dip, Bud, Diet Coke, Evian — as well as party favors: condoms, lubricant. Large signs posted around the room blast messages about AIDS and etiquette, including "WEAR CONDOMS" and "BE FRIENDLY." These are the mantras of the OBoys! The

"O" refers to "orgy." Organizers Allan Gassman (Allan OBoy!) and Marshall (you guessed it, Marshall OBoy!) circle the room, making sure participants have all the favors they need. The news of these parties is shocking gays as much as it is their straight counterparts.

Contrary to popular opinion, much of the gay community is as offended by public displays of sex as is mainstream America. "I go back to pre-plague morality on all of this," says author Larry Kramer, the founder of ACT UP and Gay Men's Health Crisis. "I think that what has destroyed us has been our determination to celebrate our promiscuity. It has turned out to be unhealthy psychologically as well as physically, and I think we are capable of much more. I'm not telling people to stop fucking. I'm telling them that it is not number one on the agenda."

Kramer's philosophy, reflected in his pre-AIDS novel *Faggots*, suggests that gay male promiscuity, emerging out of centuries of repression, is an extension of that repression; it prevents men from developing lasting bonds and intimacy. At one point, the novel's protagonist ruminates, "I'm running away, I'm not relating to anyone successfully, I'm not proving to the world or to myself that I know what to do with this freedom . . . If I could do that, then I'd be listened to, respected, not scorned, mocked, feared as something unfit to teach children. But when I look around me, all I see is fucking . . . My sister-in-law doesn't fuck on the streets."

On the opposite end of the spectrum is Michael Callen, a long-term AIDS survivor, singer and author who co-founded the People with AIDS Coalition as well as New York's Community Research Initiative. "Gay people are at the forefront on calling the central bluff on Western cul-

ture," says Callen, "that uses sex to sell everything from toothpaste to cars, but heaven forbid you should admit to actually having it. All the terrible things you say about us are true — we want to suck dick and so do you, we want to have sex all the time and so do you, only we'll do it and talk about it, and are that much healthier for it."

"From my perspective, the new sex radicals have a more realistic sense about the body and its limitations. All sex these days is group sex — it includes the participants and the palpable presence of AIDS and death. The sexual ethic of the '70s was every man for himself. This new sexual revolution is built upon hard-won awareness of the essential microbiological interconnectedness of us all — men perfectly willing to be their friend's keeper, enforcing safer sex standards among their peers."

To many gay politicians, Callen's perspective spells trouble. Bill Bowling, a former family counselor at the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center, argues that the need for political sophistication means "We make the strongest case possible for our own equality. We're about to reach unprecedented acceptance as a movement. Let's put the entire sexual problem on the back burner and deal with it when we're stronger. The essence of being gay has to do with more than just sexuality. It's a way of feeling, an orientation of affection." Gay people, Bowling argues, should be talking about love more, promiscuity less.

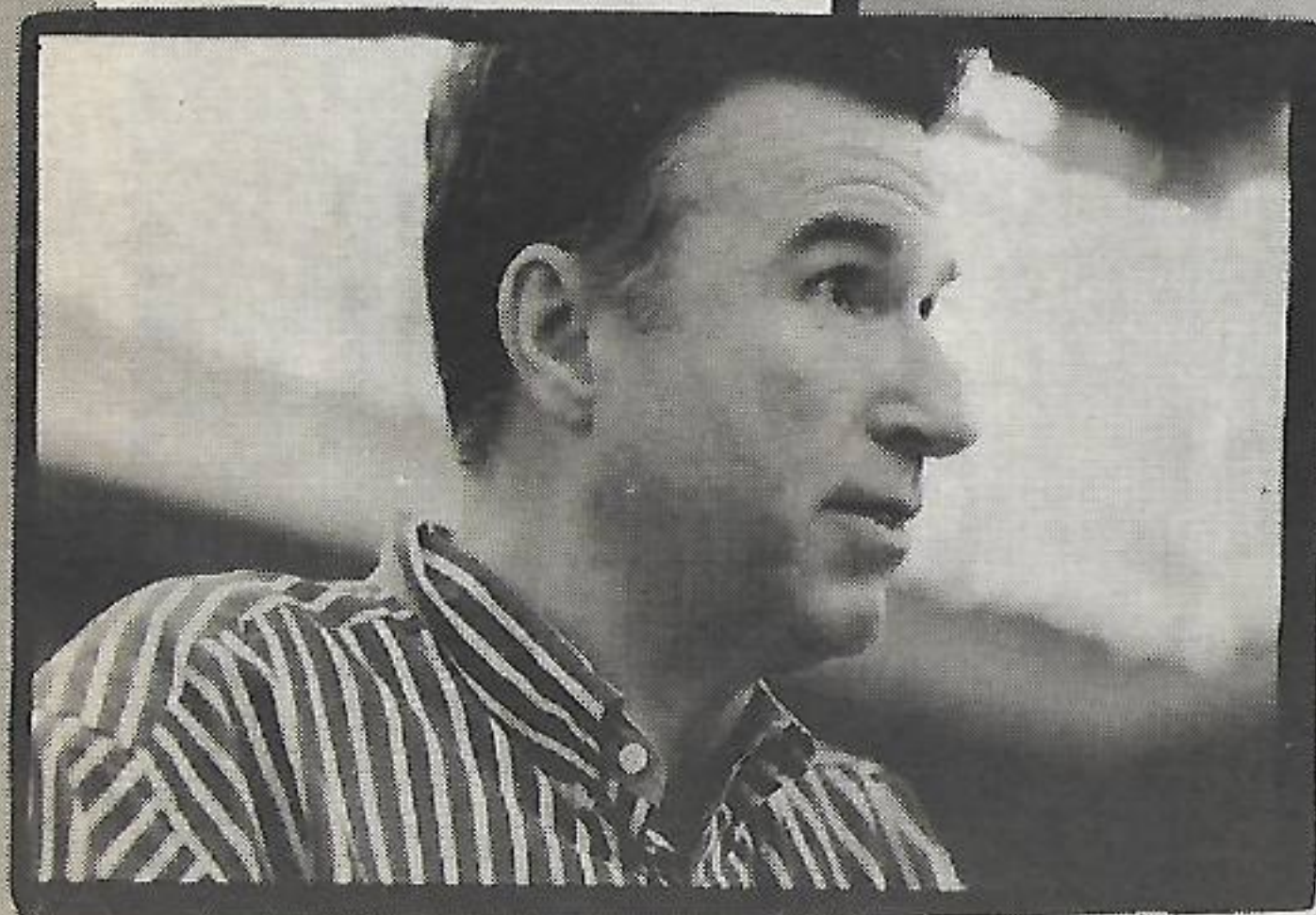
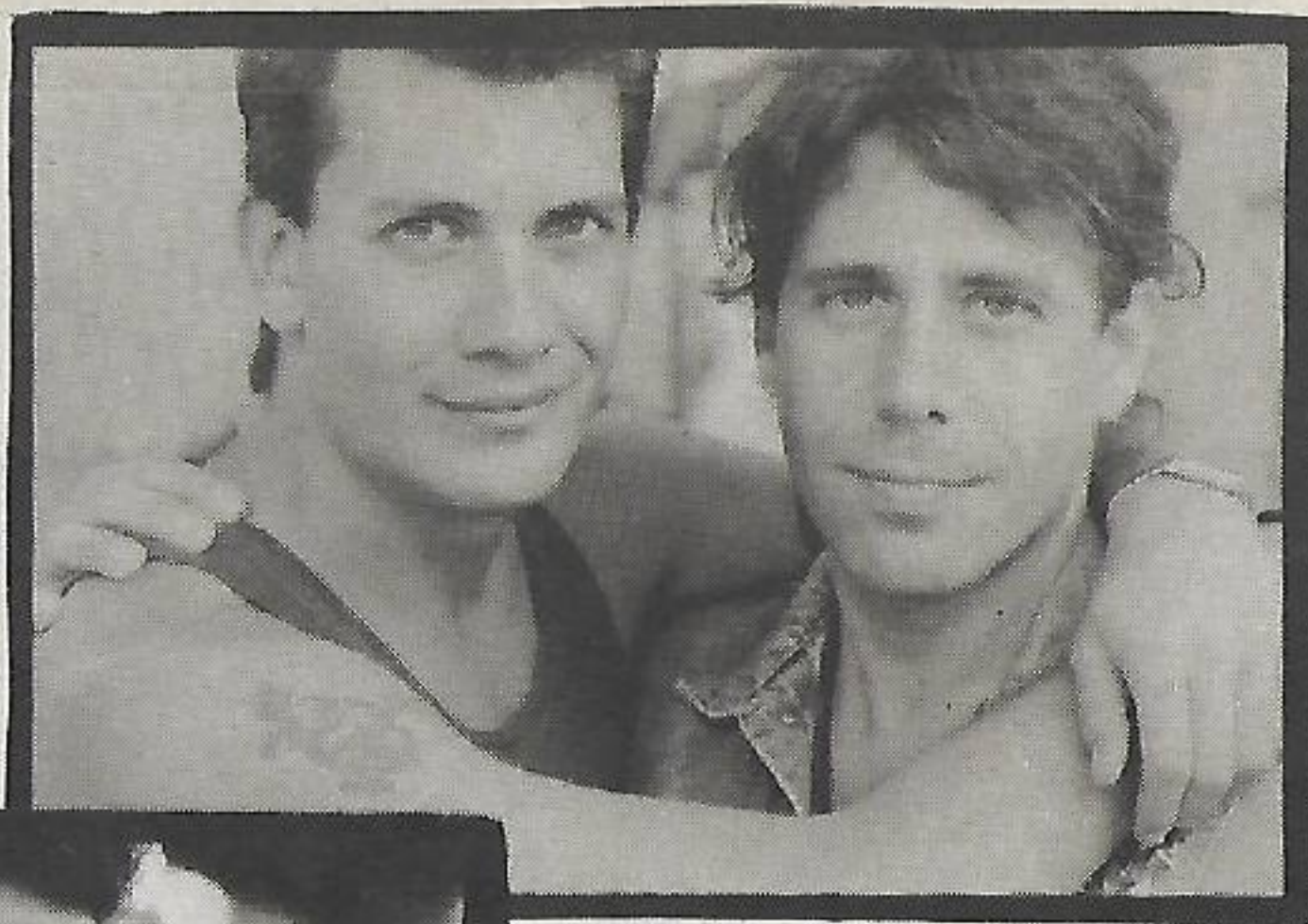
To the new sex radicals, a mainstream strategy is politically suicidal. "Gay rights isn't about housing or jobs," says Jim Curtan. "It's the right to express your sexuality and work where you want. It's the right to have sex with whomever you want and live where you want. If we were eunuchs, we wouldn't be fighting for our rights." Former city official Dave Johnson puts the issue in more apocalyptic

(Top)

Alan Gassman and
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Randy Marshall:
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(Bottom)
Jim Curtan:
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ture. "Gay people are at the forefront on calling the central bluff on Western cul- and live where you want. If we were eunuchs, we wouldn't be fighting for our rights." Former city official Dave Johnson puts the issue in more apocalyptic terms: "As long as sex remains the secret agenda of the gay movement, the gay movement will be doomed to hypocrisy and ultimate failure."

Vince OBoy!, one of the founders of the OBoys!, takes off his clothes and settles on his bed in his West Hollywood studio. He says it will make him feel "more honest, myself" for our interview. Vince is not his real name. (He fears he'll get in trouble if his boss finds out he's an OBoy!.) Three years ago, Vince, Allan and Marshall began going to underground Hollywood clubs and West Hollywood parties — Sit-n-Spin and Slam Glam. Slam Glam threw infa-

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Joseph Kramer of Body Electric:
"Most Western sex is necrophilia, one dead body having sex with another. This is in contrast to the Chinese concept of sex-as-energy — as Chi, as a charge that can take you to ecstatic states."

sex radicals

mous "underwear parties" — men would show up, check their clothes except for their briefs, and dance. "Of course," says Vince, "they'd get aroused." But the moment anything sexual occurred, the bar kicked people out. Vince invited a few fellows to his house.

He soon established a system to keep the shame-based attitudes he saw too often in West Hollywood from being recreated at his home. He made everyone disrobe upon entrance, kept the lights on and schooled participants in orgy etiquette: egalitarianism and rigid codes of safe sex. "An orgy," says Vince, "is nothing

without hospitality." His formula clicked. For Vince, who became known as an "impresario of orgies," to have men gather at his home was to leave the barbarity of gay-enforced sexual persecution. "It had the feeling," he says, "of a true revolution."

But only the in-shape and attractive need apply. Admission to an OBoy! party is based on looks. At tonight's party, nearly all the men are between the ages of 20 and 35; at least two-thirds are white; few have any facial hair, forget body fat. Admission is also based on political attitudes. To become an OBoy! you must fill out a legal release; later a questionnaire

is sent to you. Questions range from how you'd respond to a man who touched you when you'd rather not be touched, to your AIDS activism. (The OBoys! have conducted safe-sex orgies after marches and demonstrations and, during last November's election, sent out mailings with a call "to vote as if your dick depended on it.")

I'm surprised by the "good vibe" in the room and wonder if that has anything to do with the absence of unattractive men. In sex clubs, the young can be ruthless in their rejection of older men. Behavior can be rude and demeaning. By

the same token, the less attractive often paw young men to the point of humiliation. Either way, it's not a pretty sight. Tonight, everyone seems relieved to be spared what OBoys! refer to as "the trolls versus Adonises" split.

Gassman provides newcomers with the OBoys! safe-sex rules: "One: No [anal] fucking without a condom. Two: Don't come in his mouth. Three: Be clear about where you draw the other lines, and respect his. Four: Assume that everybody is HIV positive. Five: Be friendly — if you don't want to play with somebody, be nice about it."

And the rules seem to work. The atmosphere is remarkably comfortable; introductions are easily made. It is okay, within reason, to touch; a simple smile implies "no thanks." Two blonds hug in a shower. A few onlookers, stunned by a scene one only sees in porn, freeze. "Don't just stand there," the older blond calls out. A crowd circles the group, laughing. Not all the men look as if they work out every day at the Athletic Club, but all boast the self-confidence of men who think well of themselves and their bodies.

"We want to cultivate an attitude of generosity here," says Marshall OBoy!, sweeping back his rocker-long brown hair and gesturing to an orgy-in-the-making he's helped cultivate among three shy men. "We want people to show how good it is to — well, you know — love your brothers."

The OBoys! have caught the attention of the national media. Alan OBoy! (every bit a publicist, which is his day job) has appeared on a half a dozen talk shows, including Phil Donahue and Joan Rivers, to talk about "the healing power of frequent safer sex — its power as a community-building tool, pun intended."

But they've also pissed off many in

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power as a community-building tool, pun intended."

But they've also pissed off many in their own community. Last fall, Alan and Marshall presented their views at the annual "Creating Change" conference organized by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. They began the panel "Male Sexuality: New Awareness, Hot Action" (which I moderated) with an installation: three naked OBoys! having sex inside a cellophane cage. The other panelists were Body Electric's Jim Curtan and African-American novelist Steve Corbin.

Anger filled the hall. Word had gotten out that the OBoys! had rented a room in the hotel and were planning an orgy later on. Not everyone in the room was invited; the reason, Marshall said, was that all were not "in shape." Audience members accused the O Boys! of sexual apartheid, lambasting them for participating in the very cult of beauty with which the culture oppresses women. The more OBoys! tried to defend their sexual politics, the more hostility they generated. "I like good-looking men and can't get hard around people who aren't," Marshall said. "If you don't like what we do, why don't you start your own group?" The audience booed.

As one of the men in the room with the most advanced cases of AIDS, Michael Callen had the moral force to call a truce. "There is a hierarchy of beauty," he insisted. "And it is naive or foolish to think that everyone has to be included in that aristocracy." He said he thought sexual desire should be "placed in a natural preserve, like wetlands that are filled with bugs and harsh conditions but have a certain integrity all the same. This place ought to be off-limits to charges of political incorrectness." He added that he was 37 years old and dying, and he

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often didn't get touched when he attended OBoy! parties. "I don't blame anyone," he said. "I refuse to shame or bludgeon someone into thinking they have some political obligation to make love to me."

Callen's point is simple: while the thinkers in the gay movement argue over the value of discussing sex publicly, hundreds of men are ignoring their prattle and are having sex — publicly. All the hair-splitting can't change that. These men search for many things, some ineffable, some palpable: love, community, God, release, abandon, touch, father fig-

ures, angels and beauty. To be sure, at bottom the OBoys! policy is painfully exclusive. But inadvertently, they have stumbled on a subject that gay politics has strenuously avoided for 10 years — desire. And as sensationalistic as it might seem to outsiders, the OBoys! are trying to re-envision a world in which desire isn't something you have to be ashamed about, even in your own community.

A month later, Michael Callen and I talk in his Hollywood home. Lying on the floor, he is nauseated from the chemotherapy he receives to

resist the AIDS-induced Kaposi's sarcoma lesions in his lungs. A fever rages. A nurse provides Callen with an aspirin suppository. ("That is the best sex I've had in months," he jokes.)

"What breaks my heart," he says, leaning forward, "is my sense that the vast majority of gay men and lesbians appear to be in essential agreement with their oppressors. The 'average' monogamous queer couple — virtually indistinguishable from their conservative suburban heterosexual counterparts — do not appear to grasp the obvious fact that the same heterosexist power structure that

feels it has the right to close down back rooms and bathhouses is precisely the same power structure that keeps any form of consensual adult gay sex illegal in 20 states. You may not think it's a good idea to suck dick or eat pussy in some orgy, but your right to engage in tasteful oral sex with your lover in the sanctity of your bedroom is very much linked to a defense of the inalienable civil rights which each individual possesses to make consensual sexual choice."

Gay men, he says, should adopt the original feminist model of consciousness-raising. "We should call a truce and allow people to talk about what gets them hard now, even if the behavior seems initially politically incorrect. The next step would be to give people permission to say what they'd like to do sexually but are too frightened to admit that it turns them on." Only then, he adds, could one construct a vision of sexuality that would be as "humbly respectful of where people actually were," and that was as inclusive of sexual diversity as possible. Callen's point: "I don't believe we can get there through shaming people, even in the service of saving lives."

Callen speaks with enormous authority — he is one of the original creators, 10 years ago, of what have now become the standard rules of safer sex. More than anything else, those rules became an emblem of how swiftly the gay community responded to the onslaught of AIDS and the threat to gay identity the epidemic presented. But in the intervening years, Callen has become convinced that the rules he called for are too stringent.

"I frequently hear gay men cluck about 'all the unsafe sex' that goes on in back rooms and the few bathhouses still in existence," he says. "When I press them for specific details, which I always do, it almost never turns out that they mean unprotected anal intercourse. No, they usually mean they witnessed the sucking of uncondomed dicks. Big sucking deal. And when I ask them if they observed anyone swallowing cum, they



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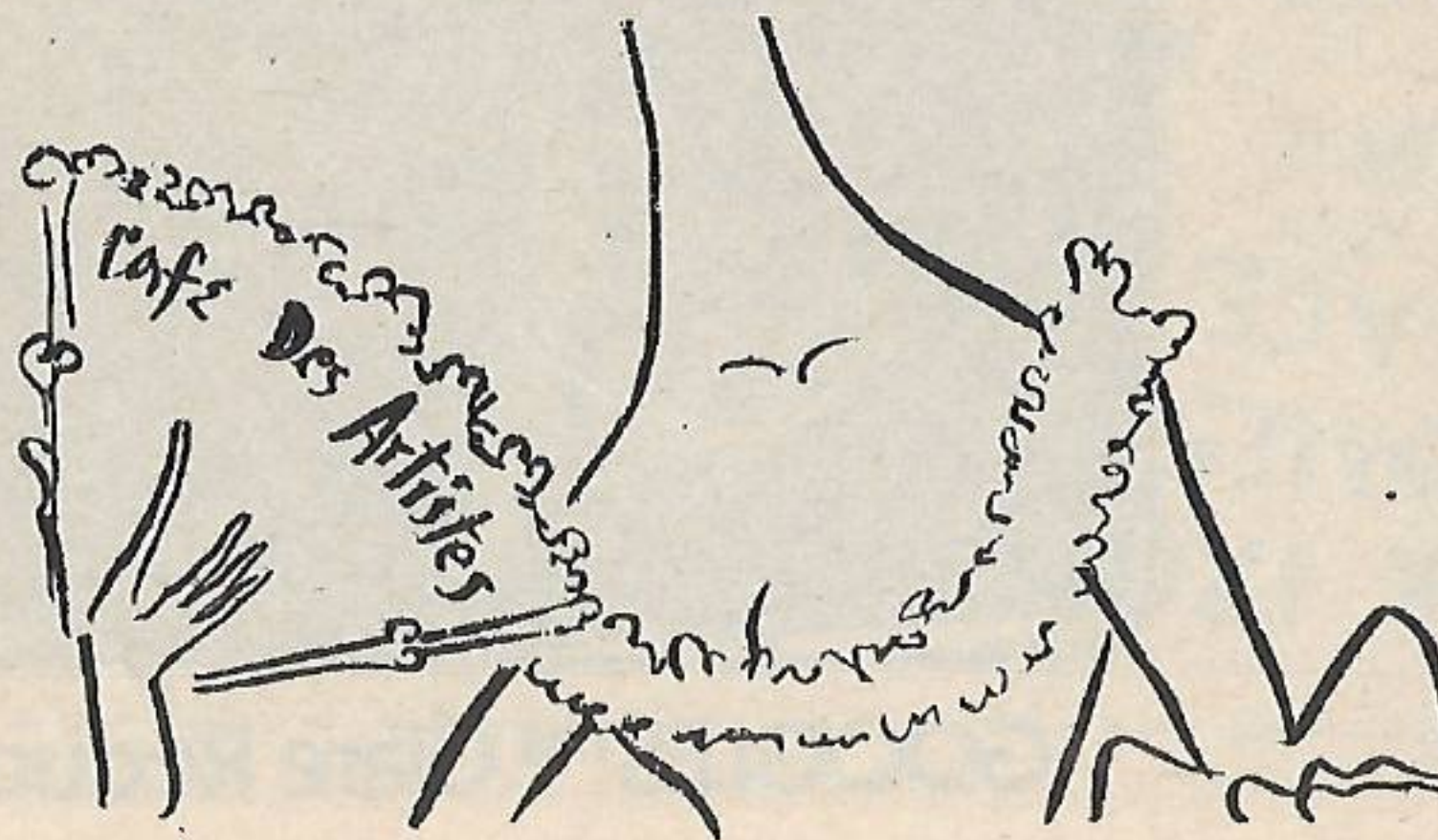
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Most Western nations, with the exception of the USA, do not list oral sex in any form as unsafe. There now exists within the gay community, says Callen, "a rift between what people do and what agencies tell us to do, and too many people feel guilty and shamed by their behavior — believing themselves to have 'slipped' when they may not have." (Contradicting Callen, many gay leaders and medical researchers believe that we don't know enough to list unprotected oral sex as "safe.") "My point in railing against the official position on oral sex," he says, "is not to pretend that I have definitive answers, but to argue passionately that we have a right to demand to see the evidence; each of us is worthy of being personally included in a fair and open critical examination of the evidence."

Callen argues that one crucial piece of news has been kept from the gay community: in the cities most devastated by AIDS, a sudden and lasting drop in the incidence of venereal diseases, including HIV, can be seen since the early '80s. (On the other side, AIDS Project L.A.'s Stephen Korsia points to a recent San Francisco study that shows a frighteningly high incidence of unsafe sex, and HIV seroconversion, among young gay and bisexual men. Argues Korsia: "Those cases of young men slipping mean that safe-sex education has failed.")

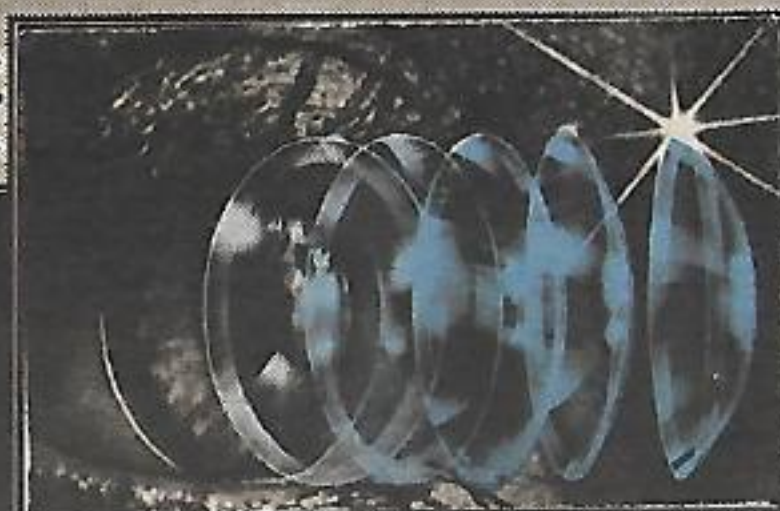
The debate, however, grows more complex if you're in the camp of those

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nance or control, but a mutual interest in how our queerness brings us together, a curiosity over each other's bodies, a genuine sense that sexuality provides us with another mode of communication."

Both Thompson and Baker are part of Black Leather Wings, which seeks to blend radical sexuality with spiritual ritual. "It becomes more appealing to have sex with someone who has been initiated rather than someone who hasn't," says Thompson. Adds Baker, "In some cases, when one is looking for an ideal partner, the gender of the person is secondary to what that person knows about herself or himself." For Thompson and Baker, the experiment to detach sex from love has, in turn, reinserted love as the central motivating force behind sex. "I am interested in promiscuity giving way to a heart connection," says Baker. Adds Thompson: "I'm after the notion of discovering something finer in all this — sex as a path toward knowing, toward manhood, individuation, initiation. I shudder to think that we would be re-creating the activity of the '70s in a '90s package."

Baker and Thompson's vision, though, is far too elite for most gay men. "If you are using the word *sex*," says Callen, "99 percent of the gay community would say that's sucking or fucking." He's right. Body Electric has managed to demonstrate that sex can be more than genital-focused orgasms — that sex includes community-building, the concept of *chi*, the prospect of healing and profound, sustained pleasure. But neither Body Electric nor Baker and Thompson's radical sexuality is widely accepted in the gay community. As Callen puts it, "Gay men rarely feel good enough about the kinds of sex they are having to make the leap into uncharted terrain."

But then, it seems, a certain schizophrenia is inevitable. For at the heart of gay liberation is the simple question: What makes us gay? And whatever the answer may be, it's a bundle of contradic-

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But then, it seems, a certain schizophrenia is inevitable. For at the heart of gay liberation is the simple question: What makes us gay? And whatever the answer may be, it's a bundle of contradictions. Some gays, for instance, want inclusion, but their sexual tastes are often based on exclusion. Some want dignity, but their sexual values may not provide them with easy approval. Some want the culture to see them as more than their sexuality and to accept them for their differences, but it is sexual desire that often first awakens many to their essential differences. Some want to find love in unlikely places, but that ignores the gay men who want to find love in the community. Some want to analogize the gay movement to the civil-rights struggle, but the defining moral principle of the civil-rights movement was race, while the overriding principle of the gay movement is sex to some, equal rights to others. And, of course, the gay movement, indeed the culture as a whole, exhibits extreme ambivalence in addressing what gays do in bed — or in back rooms.

These are agonizing contradictions, but the recourse is to censor the discussion until we're forced to respond to it against our will, whether in the spread of an epidemic or in right-wing propaganda. Rather than see sexuality as a problem gays have to shield from heterosexuals and from their own conservative impulses, it would make greater sense to see it as a social experiment gays have to offer to the culture — to return sexuality to its central role in life and reconnect it to pleasure, politics and the mysteries of life and death. **LA**