

SURF WARS: The battle
for a beach in
Long Beach (Light)

CODE WARS: The battle
for the soul of
software (Frauenfelder)

PLUS: That new
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LA



What

Next?

The
Gay
Movement
at the
Crossroads
By Douglas
Sadownick



CÉSAR PORTILLO: "The [Gay and Lesbian] Center has never been involved in getting the gay and lesbian person on the street excited about social change and being gay."



PETER CASHMAN: "The corporatizing of the gay community is deplorable."

THE WORST OF THE AIDS CRISIS MAY BE OVER, BUT THE GAY COMMUNITY IS DEADDER THAN EVER.

Nationally and locally, things seem on the surface to be bright: Agencies such as Los Angeles' own Gay and Lesbian Center reign like generous monarchs over flush fiefdoms, bringing services to the community's poorest while rubbing elbows with the rich to raise their millions, providing thousands of HIV tests, legal services, daily mental-health counseling sessions and medical checkups not only to gays, but to everyone. The accomplishments of the Center, and of a legion of other similar groups, have helped ensure that advancements in drug regimens and therapies are reaching the street, where optimism about AIDS rivals jubilation over the Dow Jones as a herald of a new Eisenhower era of ever-rising health and prosperity.

And complacency. At the end of the gay '90s, as AIDS deaths reach their lowest level since the epidemic began, some gay activists are seriously concerned about the slumbering apathy among the gay masses, the virtual blackout of gay political analysis in the mainstream media, and the direction in which powerful service providers like the Gay and Lesbian Center have chosen to lead the community. "I think the community is in the lowest ebb in the entire time I've been here, which is 20 years," says ACT UP founding member Peter Cashman. "Gay and lesbian leadership is an oxymoron in L.A. County."

The concern is not just a local one. When the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's gay political-action committee, endorsed Alfonse D'Amato for reelection to the U.S. Senate over the Democratic challenger, Chuck Schumer, last year, critics in New York decried the decision as yet another example of the people's power being sucked away by arrogant and wayward national institutions.

But within that national fight to resuscitate grassroots gay activism, Los Angeles is shaping up as an early and bloody battleground. Over the last half-year, hostilities have broken into the open, engulfing Cashman and other local gay leaders such as Michael Weinstein, president of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, and Terri Ford, a lesbian health-care activist, and institutions such as the

newly formed OUT LOUD, whose members, in a public letter distributed last fall, accused the Gay and Lesbian Center of "cowardice" and were called "misguided" in return. Some of the fierce divisiveness may be attributed to personal and professional rivalry. But on a deeper level, the war between grassroots activism and service provision reflects an age-old philosophical disagreement in the gay-rights movement between consumerism and radicalism, between checkbook activism and street activism, between corporate culture and people power, between fitting in (gay assimilation) and maximizing differences (gay pride), between being "normal" and being "in your face." In that sense, the fight isn't just a disagreement over the tactics of the gay movement; it's a fight for the movement's soul.

GAY ACTIVISM WASN'T ALWAYS OXYMORONIC IN LOS ANGELES. The first effort to politically organize homosexuals in North America took place here when Harry Hay started the Mattachine Society in 1951. That unprecedented effort sprouted an institute; an early gay magazine, *One Incorporated*; and a homophile movement that set the stage for the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion in New York City. In the '70s, the Gay Liberation Front took root in Los Angeles; two of its leaders, Morris Kight and Don Kilhefner, went on to co-found what was then called the Gay

Community Services Center. The first effort to organize people on gay spiritual terms, which divorced gay self-realization from worship in traditionally hostile religions, took place in Los Angeles, with locals such as Hay, Kilhefner and Mitch Walker birthing the now nationwide Radical Faerie Movement in 1979.

When the AIDS epidemic hit Southern California, it was met with that same revolutionary zeal. Just as the '70s fostered a liberation wherein gays hoped "the love of comrades" would transform society and its ills, the '80s brought a solidarity wherein gays stood up for the sick and dispossessed. Even as they nursed the dying, gays had to fight. The evil of AIDS gave new license to what veteran activist Wendell Ford describes as "the continuous thousand years of genocidal anti-gay suppression rooted in religious fundamentalism coupled to implacable heterosexism." A few pundits and politicians, along with millions of ordinary citizens, equated gay sex with death and damnation, and national petitions and state propositions pushed for AIDS quarantines. So even as demonstrators demanded that the *L.A. Times* and then-Governor George Deukmejian pay greater attention to the need for an AIDS cure, they also had to defend themselves against amped-up hatred.

Local activist Weinstein was emblematic of the dual response. In the fall of 1986, even as he was planning the establishment of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF), Weinstein organized a protest in front of Michael Antonovich's house protesting the L.A. County supervisor's homophobic comments blaming AIDS on gays. It was a public humiliation for Antonovich, the more so because the media adored the spectacle, and it demonstrated the central ethic of grassroots politics: You don't have to have a million dollars to thwart a county supervisor and even to get your picture in the paper. You just have to be un-



TERI FORD: "Gay movement leaders have become institutional couch potatoes."



DARREL CUMMINGS: worries about "gratuitous, mean-spirited and intentionally divisive attacks on those of us who have spent our lives organizing for justice."

WHAT NEXT?

THE GAY MOVEMENT AT THE CROSSROADS
BY DOUGLASS SADOWNICK

afraid to shout at him and get arrested during a Board of Supes meeting, and to have a couple of dozen people at your side ready to do the same.

The following year, the New York-born group ACT UP opened offices in Los Angeles. A nonviolent but "in your face" movement, ACT UP, or AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, staged "Die-Ins" and "Kiss-Ins," "phone zaps" and other ploys to call attention to society's neglect of those dying with AIDS. In those days, you'd turn on the TV to see thousands of protesters collapsing on the busiest rush-hour streets of New York City or Paris or San Francisco — even as other ACT UP organizers met with the highest officials from the Food and Drug Administration. In Los Angeles, the group called attention to poor sex education in high schools and to the city's refusal to engage in needle exchanges, and forced the county Board of Supervisors to install a much-needed AIDS ward at L.A. County/USC Medical Center. Their efforts were joined by the even more radical Queer Nation.

Both groups were killed by exhaustion, by internal bickering, by a covert but unintentional racism that alienated gay people of color and by the AIDS-related deaths of their most charismatic members, such as Mark Kostopolous, Connie Norman, Wayne Karr, Cory Roberts, Larry Day and Cary Bobier. But they were also done in by a change of climate. Even as AIDS ushered in a new political radicalism, it fostered a contradictory need for service, service provided by the solicitation of large amounts of money. AIDS, then, helped revive a debate that had characterized the gay movement since its origins in the early '50s. Gay men, along with some lesbians, questioned anew the split between the "grassroots position," dedicated to liberating gay people and attacking homophobia, and the "service position," which seeks financial resources for gays to take care of themselves.

The positions had long coexisted, but uneasily. The Mattachine Society had started off determinedly radical and grassroots, fired by Hay's Marxist origins and his notion of gays as an "ethnic minority." But Hay was ousted by a more assimilationist clique that pushed hand-holding with victims of homophobia rather than a fighting-back attitude. The revolutionary pulse of gay liberation erupted again in the '70s with GLF and the Faerie Movement, but was overshadowed once more in the '80s, as rich L.A. moguls such as Sheldon Andelson and Judge Rand Schrader and the now-defunct Municipal Elections Committee of Los Angeles (MECLA) a gay PAC, perfected what would be called "checkbook activism." An entire culture of gay white industry men — as in "film industry" — respectably suited and situated on the Westside, found that waving big checks in the air won them a seat at the political table. They even got a city of their own, West Hollywood.

It was this swank coterie (through a MECLA successor organization called ANGLE) that helped elect Bill Clinton, and that lost prestige when Clinton took the advice of one of ANGLE's leaders, David Mixner, and, without consulting a broader range of gay advice, tried to force the admission of gays into the military. And it was this same clique of affluent moguls that built L.A.'s glamorous AIDS monarchy, exemplified by AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA), which opened in 1982, soon after L.A.'s first diagnosed AIDS case, and the Gay and Lesbian Center.

Unlike APLA, which is a dedicated "AIDS agency," the Gay and Lesbian Center is considered a broader-service "gay agency." Like APLA, it relies on massive outside fundraising. The Center's changing regimes reflect the communal to corporate evolution of L.A. gay activism. The previous executive director was Torie Osborn, a woman

who could run a board meeting one day and get arrested the next in an ACT UP demonstration. Her successor, Lorri Jean, recalls that when Osborn handed over the reins, "One of the things she said to me was that there really needed to be a focus on professional managerial systems," and Jean, who had formerly served as the highest-ranking openly gay federal employee of the Reagan and Bush administrations, was nothing if not professional. Until her departure last February, she led the Center through six years of unbridled (and, most remarkably, scandal-free) growth. It is now the largest such agency in the world, with the biggest budget: \$32 million. Under Osborn, the center had offered limited HIV and AIDS services, "early intervention" programs that monitored people's health until they got too sick, then referred them elsewhere. Now, with millions raised from the California AIDS Ride and other sources, the Center provides primary and specialty care to its HIV clients. Its HIV clinic tests twice as many people (800) each month as the Whitman-Walker Clinic in D.C., the second-largest testing site in the country.

Jean also created Lambda Medical Group, the first ever gay and lesbian health-care program, and the Village, a new building housing cultural and educational programs, and built a permanent multimillion-dollar endowment to pay for it all. "We are," Jean says, "very fiscally sound."

But at what cost?

Activist Cesar Portillo contends that the organization's wealth is "covering up the fact that the Center has never been involved in getting the gay and lesbian person on the street excited about social change and being gay." He adds, "Activism doesn't run in their blood." Portillo is the governmental-affairs director for the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, an AIDS agency that, at 12 years old, is >

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nearly as flush as the Gay and Lesbian Center, with an impressive empire of clinics and hospices providing some of the finest care in the country to people with HIV and AIDS. AHF never turns a person away due to lack of funds. Its budget skyrocketed from \$9.7 million in 1993 to \$29.6 million in 1996, because it understood, even before the advent of the protease movement, that medical care superseded the importance the AIDS community had so far put on holding people's hands as they waited to die.

For all that, AHF has a far grittier political approach than other AIDS agencies or the Center. Its emphasis on access to treatment over disease management has kept it close to the pulse of the street and responsive to the poor and people of color, and politically pushy and independent. Its outreach has included the development of a cultural phenomenon: a hopping café, WeHo Lounge, situated on Santa Monica Boulevard, smack-dab in West Hollywood's Boys' Town, that offers HIV education and gay cultural events somewhat more sexy than most AIDS community "workshops."

Under founder and director Weinstein, AHF has inherited the disruptive, revolutionary mantle of ACT UP and Queer Nation; AHF is the one organization in the gay and AIDS community that on a regular basis disregards walls and proper decorum to raise more of a ruckus. Its freedom lies in its source of support. Because AHF depends heavily on direct government dollars, it's less frightened to make a fuss than those groups like the Gay and Lesbian Center whose growth and programs require an influx of millions of dollars from donors who must not be alienated.

Like the Center, AHF has its critics: What some call a godsend, others call a monopoly. Weinstein is likewise called either visionary or obnoxious, depending on whom you talk to. The distaste of some gay leaders for Weinstein and Portillo has many causes — Ferd Eggan, the L.A. city AIDS coordinator, considers Weinstein an opportunist unable to work in a collective way with others — but at root is a dis-

agreement between in-your-face tactics and making nice. While AHF may offer a boost to incipient grassroots energies, it remains, like ACT UP and Queer Nation before it, an exception to the rule. The blander of the AIDS and gay-service providers still reign supreme, largely because they serve a need — or did.

DESPITE THE ONGOING CLASH OF styles of AHF and the Center and of other, smaller groups, and despite the seething tensions between money and moxie, L.A. gay activism seemed to have achieved a sort of stable, if uneasy, equilibrium in the late 1990s. That is, until October 1998 and the murder of Matthew Shepard.

The week of October 4, the same week that 22-year-old gay University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard was picked up, beaten and left to die tied to a fence outside of Laramie, Wyoming, AHF was in the midst of a hard-hitting media crusade against the policies of Mayor Richard Riordan that included a demonstration attended by about 60 people. Michael Weinstein had learned that the Housing Office for People With AIDS was sitting on between \$13 million and \$17 million in undistributed funds, and he blamed both the AIDS community and Riordan for not releasing the money fast enough, while hundreds, including some AHF clients, died on the street. He and Portillo held an overnight vigil in front of the mayoral mansion in Hancock Park. Supported by foot soldiers such as ACT UP veteran Terri Ford, who knew how to stage a demo on short notice, Miki Jackson (a lesbian veteran activist) and Morris Kight (a co-founder of the Center and now on AHF's board), the cadre got the broadcast media to break the AIDS community's silence about the scam.

The demonstration had been sparked by the plight of a homeless man, Don Hammerich, a 67-year-old retired Marine with AIDS, who was near death and couldn't find a safe place to sleep at night. As Shepard fought for his life in a Colorado hospital, Hammerich fought the same battle on an L.A. street. (He died on



January 20.) The parallel was evident to Portillo — that's what had him sleeping on cold pavement in protest. As he would explain, more than 1,090 anti-gay hate crimes had been reported to the police in the country's largest cities during the preceding year. And that didn't include the toll of more-subtle violence, the homophobia that kept men like Hammerich leading lives in the closet. "The people I'm advocating for are not literally being strung on a fence to die in the snow," Portillo said later, "but there's little difference."

When the news came that Shepard had died, Portillo huddled with AHF colleagues Weinstein and Ford. If they waited for the rest of the gay community to do something, would anything happen? "Gay-movement leaders have become institutional couch potatoes, protecting funding

sources as much as, if not more than, the dispossessed," Ford complained. She, along with her film-industry girlfriend, Lauren Stephens, and half a dozen others, decided to challenge the service-over-militancy attitude. On the spot, they formed a grassroots group, OUT LOUD. It had no office, no phone, no constituency and no money. But it took responsibility, together with members from AHF, for staging an action that very night. Ford and others posterized, and set up a sound system, and called and e-mailed hundreds of friends and the media to meet up in front of WeHo Lounge.

What took place was spontaneous combustion. Young gays who had never attended a street action in their lives showed up to cry at the tragedy and to warn straight America that the hate >

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must stop. But many gay leaders were absent, most conspicuously the staff of the Gay and Lesbian Center.

Their slight infuriated OUT LOUD's organizers. Almost a month later, on November 6, 1998, Tay Aston, a lesbian activist associated with OUT LOUD and with roots in ACT UP and AHF, wrote the Center directors, demanding a meeting to "voice our concerns over the leadership philosophy" of the Center. Aston added that her group was "very concerned about the lack of grassroots activism demonstrated" by the world's largest gay and les-

bian center. "Why was an AIDS agency the first to respond to the brutal Matthew Shepard murder?" she asked, and insisted that the gay community needed "leadership on the streets, where the community can see our leaders in action." She demanded to know why executive director Lorri Jean, or for that matter any other senior manager, wasn't on the microphone that night. To her mind, "Fearing the reaction of the center's funding sources is an invalid reason for not speaking directly to the members of the community served by this organization."

Darrel Cummings, then deputy director of the Gay and Lesbian Center, responded on November 9 with a three-page memo arguing that allegations "the Center did not respond in a timely or appropriate manner to the vicious murder of Matthew Shepard not only illustrate lack of information but represent a gratuitous, mean-spirited and intentionally divisive attack on those of us who have spent our lives organizing for justice." He added that the Center had held a press conference immediately after the Shepard news, and had participated in a candlelight coalition effort, "as we always do," to respond on the streets the following Wednesday in West Hollywood. During her speech, Cummings

added, Lorri Jean was "out and loud."

Some were not swayed. "Lorri Jean is a fantastic fund-raiser but not a very good leader," said OUT LOUD co-founder Terri Ford, who was disturbed that Jean had run for Riordan's Charter Commission in the spring of 1997 without disclosing her lesbianism or identifying where she worked. "What message does it send to people when the executive director of the largest gay agency in the country runs for political office in the closet?" Jones asked, and argued, "When you make financial resources your emphasis, you lose the animating spirit that allows gays to organize grassroots issues, and you actually abandon the person on the street."

OUT LOUD's response to Cummings' memo, faxed out on December 15, stressed exactly that disconnect between protest and purse strings. It blasted a recent fund-raising mailer from the Center that used Shepard's death to solicit dollars. The signers of the OUT LOUD memo — Lauren Stephens, Clint Trout, Terri Ford, Jeri Deitrick, Karen Mall — also took issue with how the Center handled another recent matter, a protest against the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), a quasi-scientific, anti-gay organization that on October 24 convened a conference at the Biltmore Hotel in downtown L.A. The gay community knew very little about the homophobic convention and did not mobilize against it, a complacency OUT LOUD laid at the Center's doorstep. "And then there's the cowardliness of the Center regarding the NARTH protest," OUT LOUD's fax read. "Shame on you for that lack of action."

Cummings labeled OUT LOUD's complaint about NARTH "misguided," and noted that the Center had successfully routed NARTH from its intended lodgings. "Immediately upon learning that this conference was being held at the Beverly Hills Hilton," he said, the Center had "engaged with others to end the hotel's relationship with the conference." The Hilton did back out, and the conference was held at the Biltmore. For Ford, that effort wasn't enough, "a Center contingent was not there [at the Biltmore]. That was very clear."

Cummings ended his letter agreeing with OUT LOUD that "press conferences alone do not eliminate homophobia or win civil rights," but he also questioned the efficacy of "public actions only held in the most gay- and lesbian-friendly municipality in the country." He implied that the joint effort was preferable to those groups who act on their own, adding that "change happens best when acting in coalition with our community partners, rather than dictating and grandstanding as some large organizations are capable of doing."

OUT LOUD claimed that many other groups had come to its demonstration. "We worked totally in coalition with others," Ford said.

The protests over Matthew Shepard have died down, but the political crisis they opened up keeps escalating, with gays and lesbians in Los Angeles questioning just how gay-friendly corporate-friendly activism can ever be. The most striking example again implicates the Gay and Lesbian Center, which last year took \$34,000 in corporate donations from Coors beer, the same brewing company whose founding family and affiliated foundation have extensive ties to right-wing and anti-gay groups. Since 1977, the gay reaction to Coors has been a successful national boycott. It's a boycott the Coors Brewing Co. and the Coors family have worked to overturn, through what Don Kilhefner calls a "slick, heavily funded and deceitful public-relations campaign to seduce the gay and lesbian community into believing Coors funding of virulently homophobic activi-

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ties is a thing of the past." Kilhefner criticizes the Center for accepting tainted money, angering former deputy director Cummings, who notes, "We are no longer engaged with Coors."

"I don't think the Coors boycott still has such a strong life," Cummings says, and draws a distinction between the Coors corporation and the private foundation that funds the right wing, saying, "It's not a seamless relationship."

"To fail to see the connection between one arm of the organization and another would be naive if it weren't so greedy," Kilhefner counters. Kilhefner's anger at the Center is exacerbated by the fact that 25 years ago he helped found it. Still, it isn't the only target of his ire. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation's receipt of \$100,000 last October from Coors also demonstrates, he says, "these groups cheapening themselves, turning their backs on gay and lesbian liberation." Kilhefner accuses GLAAD and the Center of being "bought by the highest corporate bidders without regard for the moral and political consequences of their acts or accountability" to the community.

Peter Cashman, an early founder of ACT UP/L.A., also sees a connection between the reliance of gay service organizations on donor funds and the reliance of gay politics on outside authority. "The corporatizing of the gay community is deplorable," he says, and attributes the problem in part to the "Clinton-as-savior syndrome" that pervaded the gay community, especially during Clinton's first term, when "People just sat back and thought our problems were over. We were naively misled by organizations like the Human Rights Campaign Fund and the Center, that Clinton had the power to do what he said. Of course, we have nothing for it. When Clinton leaves power, the average gay and lesbian person is no better off."

Cashman attributes much of gay disengagement during this crisis to the debacles of the gays-in-the-military and matrimony controversies, backed with great gusto by the national gay-movement machine but offering no single victory. The gay, lesbian and bisexual vote is declining rapidly, down to 4 percent of total voters in last year's election according to Voter News Service. Such figures make Cashman and others wonder at the state of gay mobilization. What ever happened to the fundamental task of organizing people locally, he asks, that was once done so well by groups like the Stonewall Democratic Club?

Cashman sees a role for both of the survival strategies adopted by the gay community: corporatization on one hand, grassroots activism on the other. They need not be seen as opposites, he says, but rather as complementary and fundamental parts of any mature political movement during the 21st century. But on the verge of that century, it is clear that the balance is tipping in gay activism. AIDS is no longer the filter through which gay life is regarded, simply because AIDS is no longer one of the 10 leading causes of death, dropping from eighth place in 1996 to 15th in 1997. And as the present danger recedes, the more fundamental issues of gay life need to be addressed.

It is those more fundamental issues that, in the end, drive the debate about political apathy and corporate co-optation. Underlying the Coors controversy and other recent contretemps, such as GLAAD spokesperson Chastity Bono's highly publicized statement that the TV show *Ellen* was "too gay," are matters of self-respect. The question has been asked: When gay leaders and organizations settle for payoffs instead of a transformational vision, is systemic blindness to gay power and potential keeping them from taking care of their communities in some more pro-

foundly healing and revolutionary way? Don Kilhefner has expressed his irritation with the Gay and Lesbian Center's failure to examine what he sees as an internalized homophobia, a symptom of which is a "desperate kind of drive to be accepted by people like Mayor Riordan or Clinton or anyone in a position of authority" at the expense of building a grassroots ethic and élan.

IT IS ON THIS LEVEL THAT THE MATTHEW Shepard tragedy takes on resonance: If his mistake in seeking intimacy with his enemies and getting into the truck with his attackers can be seen as a sort of fatal naiveté, what can be said of the efforts of

gay activists to solicit mainstream acceptance, even to collude with hostile corporations? The issues that activists are arguing on the street reflect the deepest psychological concerns of gay men and women wishing to understand the meaning and potential of their identity and find a path to wholeness and true leadership. Wendell Jones contends that gay activism needs to also be what he calls a "psychology for the people. We are one of the only minorities raised by people who are not us and who teach us to hate ourselves," Jones said, "and that deeply embedded self-hatred holds us back from a liberationist vision unless we deal with it ongoingly." Without that continuing la-

bor and vigilance, Kilhefner agrees, "gays will fail at realizing our true potential and contribution to society." The potential is formidable. Jones quotes Edward Carpenter, a 19th-century socialist who believed that the sufferings of gays were "destined in their turn to lead to another wide-reaching social organization and forward movement in the direction of art and human compassion." The battle that is brewing in Los Angeles over gay activism will ultimately demonstrate whether gay liberation, long in hibernation and without the crutch of a crisis or the seduction of cold, hard cash, can mean something revitalizing not just to gays but to society as a whole. □

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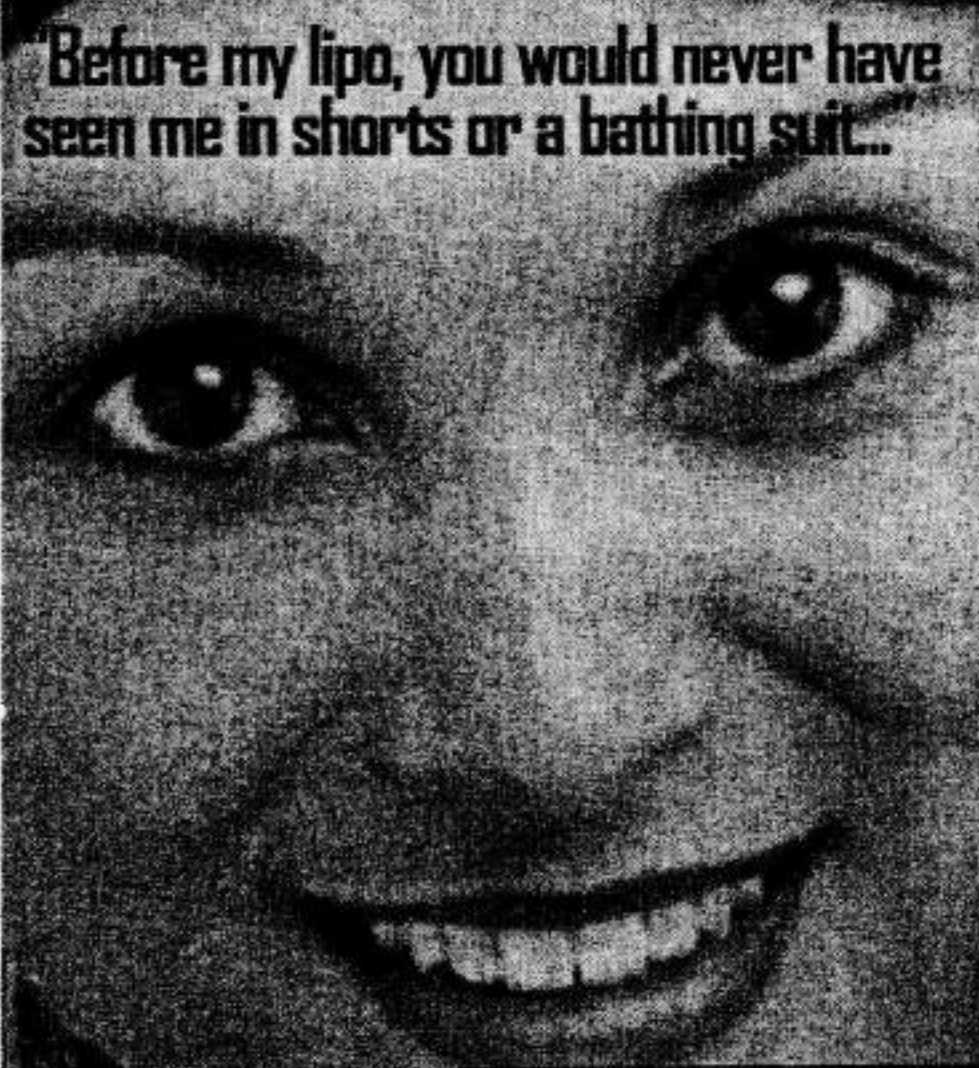
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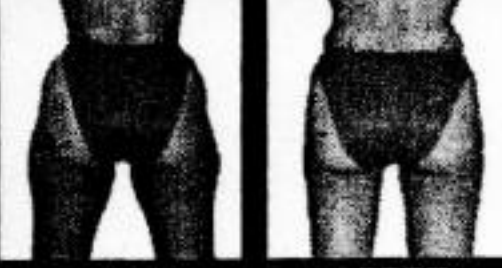
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