

JUSTIN MAGLER.

Affective Touch in the Archive of *Bulk Male* Magazine

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Note: This essay presents sexually explicit language and images.

It is an affective force that is active,
intelligible, and has genuine efficacy:
it is both moved and moving. It is a force that
generates sensory and emotional gratification. It is a force that pro-
duces shared capacity and commonality. It is a force that, though
cross-cut by all kinds of impulses, has its own intrinsic value.¹

—Nigel Thrift

The image depicted in figure 1 is of two pages of an erotica magazine, stuck together and held open by my hand; it touches and is touched. It excited me as I thumbed through these effected and affecting pages in the archive. The flow of time's touch implicates this magazine of bodies into becoming a body in and of itself. It is seen through the seepage from outside the heterotopia of "Carlos," naked in a rocky landscape, within the collection of *Bulk Male* magazine found in the GLBT Historical Society's archive in San Francisco. Even though my encounter with *Bulk Male* is "cross-cut" by my desire, this magazine has an allure—an affective pull—that imbues this published object with "intrinsic value" when understood as a body stimulating response in contemporary bodies and artistic practices. *Bulk Male* acts as a classified ad in the literal and figurative sense. The magazine operated in the 1990s to create community for fat-and-gay men as well as other subcultures of gay men not conforming to gay bodily ideals.² Embracing the negative *affects* of shame and trauma of historical contingency helps to understand how this magazine operates as an archival body producing subjective embodiment through embrace and refusal of discursively produced shame.³ *Bulk Male* magazine becomes a classified ad and acts as an affected body through the display of fat male bodies as objects of gay/queer desire, in its presence in both the GLBT Historical

1 Nigel Thrift, "Understanding the Material Practices of Glamour," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 292.

2 Here, I want to clarify my use of the term *fat-and-gay*. I use it as shorthand for the men within the magazine to maintain clarity and as a means of separation from the *bear*, those who may be fat and gay but identify as bears and distance themselves from the fat-and-gay man. The magazine, however, does not assume or proscribe the sexuality of the men depicted; Jason Whitesel, *Fat Gay Men: Girth, Mirth, and the Politics of Stigma* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

3 For understandings of these negative affects in relation to queer history and its "losers," see Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

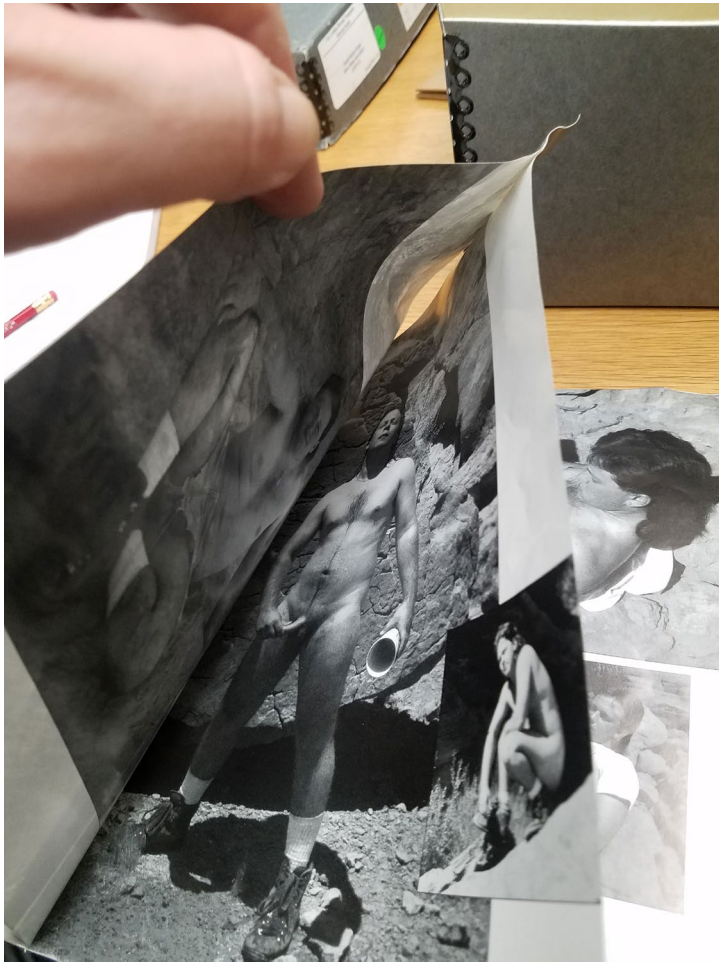


Figure 1. A spread featuring Carlos is stuck together in *Bulk Male* 4, no. 3. Photo by author, taken in San Francisco GLBT Historical Society's archive.

Society's archive and in the work of James Unsworth's *Girth and Mirth* series from 2015.

Bulk Male magazine is at the center of this project because it is a groundbreaking gay male erotica publication from the 1990s. First published in 1991, just prior to the height of the worldwide AIDS epidemic, *Bulk Male* displays fat-and-gay men in homoerotic and community-oriented ways that brush up against the hairy masculinity of the bear.⁴ It is a heterotopian space, understood through Michel

4 Lisa Cisneros, "Thirty years of AIDS: A Timeline of the Epidemic," University of California San Francisco, last modified March 23, 2012, <https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2011/06/104134/thirty-years-aids-timeline-epidemic>. It is often assumed that the 1980s was the height of the AIDS epidemic; however, statistics show that rates of infection and death were higher during the early to mid-1990s. In 1992 complications from HIV and AIDS were the number one killer of men between ages 25 and 44 in the United States.

Foucault, which operates as a physical space removed from the everyday that is produced in relation to and negation of that very same everyday.⁵ This magazine depicts subjects as objects that play on a desire of consuming reflexively, and becomes what Foucault describes as “a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality” to bear down to produce a “counteraction on the position that I occupy.”⁶ Reading this publication as affecting reaction and refusal is a reflexive act because *Bulk Male* is a reaction to its cultural contexts. It is a means of understanding subjectivity through the projection of a scopophilic desire as a similar subject and object to understand how refusal and failure function to fail and refuse respectively. *Bulk Male* is seen in fat studies discourse as proffering space for the unrestrained desire of fat-and-gay men and is conflated with the gay subcultural identity of the bear and hegemonic masculinity within that same discourse.⁷ These interventions into the heterotopian space of *Bulk Male* affect the magazine as a classified ad in our present moment through archival touch.

Turning back, the two affectively stuck together pages of Carlos naked in front of a rocky landscape in figure 1 creates this magazine as a body. His build is average and is considered a chaser in this subcultural community.⁸ A chaser has a slim or average build, while a chubby is just that: fat or larger than the chaser or average/normative standards—the fat-and-gay man. Carlos is not a typical subject of this magazine. As anthropologist Matti Bunzl notes, “chubbies and chasers are rarely confused” because they are “characterized by their different physiques as well as different behavior.”⁹ The chaser/chubby dynamic relies on binaries of top/bottom, male/female, and active/passive. In

5 Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), 330–336.

6 *Ibid.*, 4.

7 The gay *bear* is a subcultural identity, now seemingly monocultural, that is meant to signify a gay male who resists femininity by embracing and embodying masculinity through extra weight and body hair. The fat-and-gay man depicted in *Bulk Male* is entangled with the bear and his embrace of masculinity as a rejection of trauma and the effete mascots of Gay Liberation of the 1960s and 1970s. For more on these men and hegemonic masculinity, see Les Wright, ed., *The Bear Book: Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1997); Les Wright, ed., *The Bear Book II: Further Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture* (New York: Haworth Press Inc., 2001); Peter Hennen, *Faeries, Bears, and Leathermen: Men in Community Queering the Masculine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

8 This is not to say that he is a chaser because, as mentioned earlier, the sexualities of these men are not decided by the magazine but by the men themselves.

9 Matti Bunzl, “Chasers,” in *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, eds. Don Kulick and Anne Meneley (New York: Penguin, 2005), 207.

the images we see of Carlos, he asserts a more aggressive and dominant behavior ascribed to the chaser as subject. He signals a desire of and for a hegemonic masculinity that embraces the masculine as a rejection of the feminine through a lack of camp and play.¹⁰ The content of these images then, is seen as pointing to embodied refusal of femininity and passivity through his stance and expression.

The images of Carlos are important because they signal hegemonic masculinity through his posturing. Yet, the pages signal the importance and presence of the body in the archive by being stuck together. Conjecturing on the substance, one could surmise it to be off-white, diaphanous bodily viscous that trickled onto these pages; most likely, it is water damage obscuring Carlos and making him differently legible. The magazine has a presence as a body. It is produced as such by the leak that has seeped onto these pages to reveal the tension of the archive as container. Effected through its nature as an objective tool of discursive functioning around fat-and-gay male subjectivity—as a magazine—*Bulk Male* becomes about bodies both present and absent within the archive.

This physical trace of the body in the archive draws attention to the presence of bodies through their absence. Archival and digital studies scholar Marika Cifor in "Presence, Absence, and Victoria's Hair," finds a physical trace in the archive of trans activist Victoria Schneider at the GLBT Historical Society. Cifor finds a hair follicle on lipstick that embodies the metaphor of synecdoche. For Cifor, the hair represents the absence of Schneider through a follicular body being present in Schneider's absence. The assumed hair of Schneider's has an affective pull for Cifor, who understands "it as a token of emotional intimacy, a tangible and animate signifier creating intimacy between" Schneider and Cifor.¹¹ This explicates the importance of desire present in a researcher's aims of haptic and embodied understanding of one's self through another. Cifor desired to touch the archive. In brushing up against this hair follicle, Cifor transforms it into a body through metaphor, absence, and touch. Hair represents the absent body and

10 Camp and play are vital strategies that fat-and-gay men use to build community, as well as a means to refuse the shame inscribed onto fat and gay bodies through pathological narratives of worth. For more on this, see Jason Whitesel, *Fat Gay Men: Girth, Mirth, and the Politics of Stigma* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

11 Marika Cifor, "Presence, Absence, and Victoria's Hair: Examining Affect and Embodiment in Trans Archives," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015), 645-649.

shows us how this caress, whether by the researcher or by time, affects the bodies/objects contained therein through the seepage and thus, demonstrates corruption from an external world.

Photographer and theorist Allan Sekula's discussion of the archive as container furthers Cifor's affective synecdoche as it relates to the presence of the affected body of *Bulk Male*. Sekula opens up the potential of the archival body as a constructed taxonomy of difference. He exemplifies this through criminological photographs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, arguing that the archive creates the subjected body through analysis of visual representation to create hierarchies of worth. Sekula proffers that "the general, all-inclusive archive necessarily contains both the traces of the visible bodies of heroes, leaders, moral exemplars, celebrities, and those of the poor, the diseased, the insane, the criminal, the nonwhite, the female and all other embodiments of the unworthy."¹² For Sekula this is the *shadow archive*, understood as an archive that creates an absence through the symbolic and indexical bodies present therein. Conjunctly, *Bulk Male* and the construction of identity it appears to purport (embraced masculinity refusing the feminine) operates "to establish and delimit the terrain of the *other*" and, in turn, "define both the *generalized look*—the typology—and the *contingent instance* of deviance and social pathology" of the fat-and-gay man and, subsequently, the bear.¹³ I see what is present, a typology and hierarchy of worth that reveals what is absent: differently gendered and racialized bodies. In this elision, *Bulk Male* becomes a shadow archive within an already considered shadow archive.

Bulk Male creates a shadow archive through the absence of bodies as well as through the presence of classified ads and the men depicted therein. These ads make the taxonomical function of the archive and the grid imperative in implicating the reach *Bulk Male* had, however limited, in affecting community through collapsing the limits of physical space. The classified ads explicate tangibly the reach of this magazine as a discursive inciter through its collapse of physical distance.

¹² Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986), 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Fat, happy businessman, 54, 5'8", 260# of love and lust with big titties, big wide white ass, and short-horn 5" looking for a younger, average looking guy. Turn ons - nerd types (I say that lovingly because I was one), muscular, oh hell! If you like me, I'll love you! I tend to be submissive but can be versatile. I'm very clean, HIV-, a non-smoker. Write with a photo; I will answer all; to Dominick, 10597 NW 53 St, Sunrise, FL 33351. (Exp. 5 #3)

GWM, 51, 5'8", 145#, brown hair, hazel eyes, looking for 200# and up, friendship, HIV-, good natured, romantic, cuddler, affectionate, and very good at what I do. Write George Gesell, 2444 Burlington Ave. N., St. Petersburg, FL 33713. (Exp. 5 #4). **Photo #000168.**

GWM, 38, 5'10", 270#, hairy, HIV-, sincere, ISO relationship with a hairy, husky cub, bearded a plus. Interests are pop music, spectator sports, concerts, movies, etc. Letter with photo appreciated. Write Raymond Martinez, 12864 Biscayne Blvd, #222, North Miami, FL 33181-2007. (Exp. 5 #4). **Photo #000169.**

HAWAII

Lonely, GWM, 39, 200#, Brown hair, Brown eyes, bearded, pierced, non-smoker, looking for a big masculine hairy bear for friendship and a possible relationship. I enjoy pop music, movies, quiet evenings, walks on the beach. I'm FR a/p and into man smells, rimming, raunch, and safe sex. Write to L.A. Kern, Jr., 41-686 Kalaniana'ole Hwy, Waimanalo, HI 96795. (Exp. 5 #4)

GEORGIA

Hi guys, my name is TJ. I'm a GB Bear. I'm 6'2", 285#, and 30. I'm seeking a big hairy GW Bear only. For friendship or possible relationship. Must be 185# to 295#; 30 to 50 years of age; hairy all over and a nice, big, firm, hairy ass. Also must be straight forward and have a great sense of humor. I love to laugh. Truckers and travelers are welcome as well as locals. I do some light drugs but nothing major and am a non-smoker. Please send me a letter with photo. Write to TJ, Box 673, Ellenwood, GA 30049 or you may page me at (404) 902-9031. Please no j/o calls or head games. Serious bears only! (Exp. 5 #3) **Photo #000180**

Grow your own big boy. 40 years old, 5'9", 210#, brown hair, and mustache. You set the limit. Write me: Box 793, Rex, GA 30273. (Exp. 5 #5).

Cuddly teddy bear, 49, with smiling blue eyes, seeks affectionate, caring, clean, honest, loving, playful, romantic, sincere, and stable soulmate - any age, race, or weight. Letter, photo, and phone # to Ken, Box 16374, Savannah, GA 31416. (Exp. 5 #5).

GWM, 27, 5'9", 170#, bearded and hairy. Looking for large men for correspondence and fun. Very versatile, non-smoker, light drinker. Write w/ photo to Gary, 2302-D Plymouth Colony Dr., Atlanta, GA 30345

ILLINOIS

I smoke too much, work too hard, play harder, eat wrong, occasionally get too high, crave cuddling, need daily man-sized sex. All this plus: 40, 6', 350#, gray hair and big tits! Prefer extremes, short/tall, smooth/furry, dominant/submissive, younger/older. Let's get naked! Write: Tutes, 2501, Lincoln, #226, Chicago, IL 60614

GWM, 46, 5'11", 240#, graying brown hair, HIV-, professional, who likes videos, walking, cards, board games - am looking to meet HIV- guys, esp. 40-50 and under 300# for fun and maybe more. Send letter with photo to: BMB IL#6. (Exp. 5 #5).

GWM, 28, 6'2", 270#, furry, solid build, ISO Wilfred Brimley, Santa Claus, Raymond Burr look-a-likes. Send letter and photo to: BMB IL#8. (Exp. 5 #5).

Japanese, 35, 6', 200#, honest, sincere, seeking teddy bear type males, 35-45, 38"-44" waist, 6' or taller, for friendship or possible relationship in Chigagoland. Facial hair a must and dark hair a plus. BMB IL#7

6' 1-1/2", 205#, youthful 64, GWM, daddy top man-rider wants a big, strong, heavy-set son bottom horse to horseplay, mutually workout, swim, safesex, watch videos, sleep, cuddle, etc. with me. Write J.L., PO Box 1395, Melrose Park, IL 60160

INDIANA

Masculine, outdoorsy, WM, 6', 170#, brown eyes, brown hair, mustache. I'm 38 y/o, multi-talented, hard working, independent and HIV-, ISO happy, big bellied WM farmer, heavy equipment operator, local trucker or rural blue collar man for friendship and possible relationship. Please send photo/phone to BMB IN#3. (Exp. 5 #4)



Photo #000205

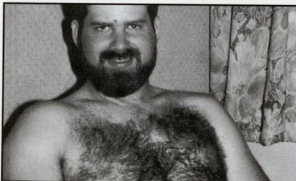


Photo #000206



Photo #000230

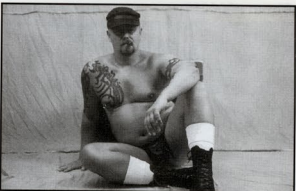


Photo #000235

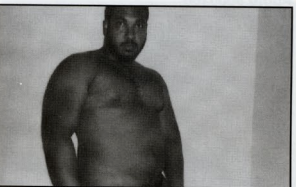


Photo #000236



Photo #000240

Figure 2 is an image of classifieds from an earlier issue of *Bulk Male*. These classifieds have an intriguing organizational structure: the text for the advertisement is placed in the center with images on the periphery—in this issue, the left or right side respectively; in later ones, on the top or bottom; and at the end, in the middle. The ads are broken up into a gridded structure of columns and rows, organized alphabetically by state then countries outside of the US, in turn collapsing topographic space onto these pages.

The classified ads show a breadth and variety of men from across the globe who actively participated in this community of desire for fat-and-gay men through a compression in distance. Collapse takes place in the classified ads through a taxonomical ordering of linguistic and pictorial bodies corresponding to embodied individuals in real geographical space. The images have a numbered caption, for example, "Photo #000123," which corresponds to an ad with the same descriptor. These indicators allow the reader to identify the linguistic body to the corresponding pictorial body of the grainy landscape, headless torso, or genitals. Often times the photo and corresponding ad are not on the same page, as evinced in figure 2. Such instances disorient topographic space through a gridded collapse. Through this, a broader and more nuanced community of fat-and-gay men comes to flourish, even to this day.

The classified ad offers a space for creating community that disrupts the shame and stigma felt by fat-and-gay men. Psychologist Michael I. Loewy and sociologist Nathaniel C. Pyle illuminate the classified ads' importance for the fat-and-gay man in community-building. They note that these classifieds were the primary means by which fat-and-gay men found partners and created friendships in spite of the limitations of technology and geographical distance.¹⁴ For Loewy and Pyle, topographic distance and the need for community were central to the creation of these publications.¹⁵ Not only arising from this need, these magazines flourished from the desire for recognition found in the classified ad.

14 Michael I. Loewy and Nathaniel C. Pyle, "Double Stigma: Fat Men and Their Male Admirers," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 146.

15 *Ibid.*, 145.

Due to the limited number of corporate advertisers willing to place ads in such niche publications, the classified ads were a major financial support.¹⁶ *Bulk Male* traces this trajectory through the growth of the classified ad section, which comprised one-fifth of the magazine's content before it shifted to a digital platform in the early 2000s. In the shift to digital form, the potential for community expanded. This is best seen in digital dating or "hook-up" applications used today, that further a geographic and temporal collapse. The move to the digital realm affects a temporal collapse in the immediacy of response and interaction. However, it leaves a lingering question: how does a response to a *Bulk Male* classified ad look? Unfortunately, the responses of *Bulk Male* classified ads are not published, nor should they be, leading this researcher's desire to lead elsewhere.

In lieu of *Bulk Male* readers' responses to these classified ads, I examine a work from artist James Unsworth's 2015 series *Girth and Mirth*, which uses images from *Bulk Male*. Unsworth responds to this magazine as archival object and discursive inscriber through collage. The image in figure 3 is one such instance. It is a collage that uses a color page from a later issue of *Bulk Male*. The work depicts two men engaged primarily in oral sex on a diamond-patterned couch. The two men, "Daddy G" and "Me" have starkly contrasting physical builds. "Daddy G" is a white, husky man and the appearing top, while "Me" is a thin, Black man. The scenes suggest that "Me" is there to please and appease "Daddy G" through oral gratification and other stimulating touch. Yet, Unsworth interrupts this scene that placates and further reifies the white male ga(y)ze. He obfuscates this gridded image with roses, pansies, marigolds, and other vegetative sex organs. These interruptions ask us to focus on what Unsworth sees as important to show, and as it turns out, it is not genitals. Instead, he draws attention to the problematic function of conscripting desire in service to a primacy of white male desire.¹⁷

Unsworth's additions focus primarily on the white chub "Daddy G" and his pleasure from the Black male chaser "Me" and his orifices.

¹⁶ Ibid., 146.

¹⁷ Bunzl, "Chasers," 204-205.



Figure 3. James Unsworth, *Untitled*, 2015, from the series *Girth and Mirth*. The work features a photospread, "Me and Daddy G," from *Bulk Male 6*, no. 4 (1997). Courtesy of the Artist.

In this way, the additions act as erasures and make present a problematic racial hierarchy by drawing attention to what is covered and uncovered. By covering genitals, Unsworth highlights deeper structural issues regarding the visual consumption of bodies. Following Bunzl, I understand these feminine signifiers as drawing attention to what he describes as a desire ascribed to a “straight male logic” embedded with a “triangulated attraction between the objects of one’s desire” prioritizing a fantasy of the viewer as the real object of desire.¹⁸ This is apparent because most of the scenes depict “Me” as the passive or bottom partner in service to a white-passing male. With additions by Unsworth, this problematic aspect of scopophilic image-production is rendered visible through the panties that cover “Daddy G’s” genitals as “Me” fellates him, for instance. This covering-of by Unsworth castrates white male desire and logic to critically respond to *Bulk Male* as a classified ad across temporal distances.

In conclusion, the affective pull of this magazine as a classified ad calling forth from the archive has been illuminated through its objected nature as well as its subjective nature in the work of Unsworth. These objects of allure and desire are affective insofar as there is outward motion in the form of a response—a response that is haptic like thumbing through *Bulk Male*’s pages, or perhaps, simultaneously additive and subtractive as in Unsworth’s *Girth and Mirth* series. Either way, the classified ad elicits motion to broaden the reach of community for fat-and-gay men. *Bulk Male* was, and is, a space for unrestrained fat desire and for community to come together through an affective impetus in refusal of shame.¹⁹ In this collapsed heterotopian space of *Bulk Male* as classified ad, the past affectively calls forth a response in our present, asking us to question why these men embraced hegemonic masculinity in favor of refusing the shame and stigma of being both fat and gay. Touching *Bulk Male* in this way bears newer understandings of identity

¹⁸ Ibid., 205.

¹⁹ Jerry Mosher, “Setting Free the Bears: Refiguring Fat Men on Television,” in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 166-193.

as both refusal and embrace of the abjection inherent to subjectivities, creating a broader community across both time and space.

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