

ARTFORUM

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REVIEWS

HAL FISCHER, Lawson de Celle Gallery:

Sometimes artists run to words to explain their motives. But the text rarely transcends the same ironic attitudinizing; it becomes an ironic counterpoint to some culturally manipulated image, or often simply repeats the rhetoric of social force (Hans Haacke and Victor Burgin are good examples of this avant-garde two-timing.) In any case, no alternative to dominant conventional imagery as imagery is attempted. When the image itself is thought to be necessarily "tainted," the responsibility of the text is to expose its meaning and function, not to serve it up as yet another readymade. The lone image, plus the repetitions of its meaning in a text, are not enough: the artist must subvert the viewer's false conclusions inductively.

By approaching HAL FISCHER's photographs from this angle I do not intend to insinuate that his work addresses itself to these problems directly. Not exactly, for his photos are quite humble in their presentation and their effectiveness. What is important is a kind of directness and clarity which signify an analytical way of thinking that can be applied to many different subject matters. Fischer applies structuralist principles to the dissection, in particular, of the homosexual subculture; but a more general, less exotic, subject might have done just as well. This is to say that Fischer never sensationalizes, and the voyeurism which seems to come so naturally to photography is absent.

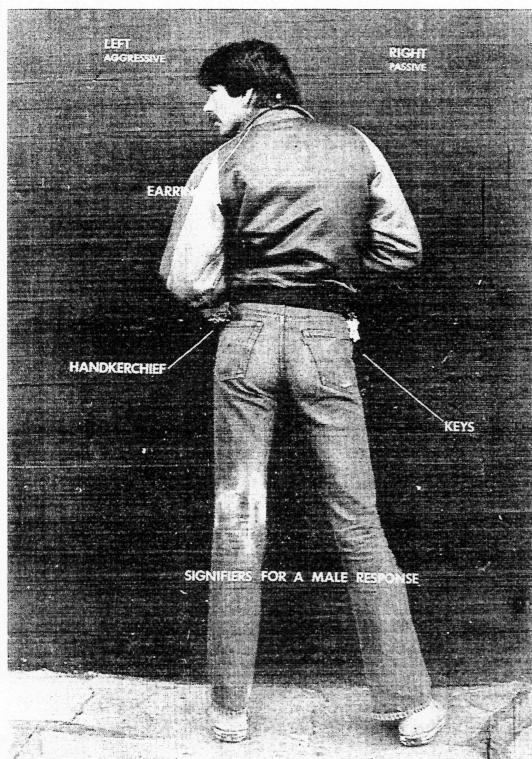
Fischer's photographs set up for our inspection an inventory of signs with texts. The texts are more than explanations: they also warn against mistaken generalities often made in "class"

analyses. If Fischer's approach is more anthropological than anything else, he nevertheless asks for a broader criticism of sexist culture. He adopts the neutral fashion-photograph look: subject is zeroed in on without intrusion. Objects are labelled; lines are drawn to the various accessories. In "Signifiers of a Male Response," the meaning of a key chain, a blue or red handkerchief, an earring, and especially the significance of the left and right sides of the body, is explained in terms of sexual preference. But this is also about the transformation of functional paraphernalia into veiled signifiers. And just when "normal world" signification may be forgotten in the general analysis, Fischer suddenly brings it back: handkerchiefs *can* be carried for the relief of nasal congestion; keys *are* worn by laborers without special sexual significance; blacks wear earrings as ornaments. Similarly, the series of "Street Fashions" (uniform, "forties trash," "jock," etc.) is both a most natural outgrowth of "street photography" and a classification based on the images that a group creates of itself.

Fischer deals occasionally with sadism and masochism, in an entirely matter-of-fact way. The meat hoist—a sadistic device for hanging someone upside down—is, on a basic level, an authentically surreal object: a hangman's post extends out into space with a pair of boots attached to it upside down. And sometimes the text is succinctly pointed: a man dressed in leather mask and chaps is accompanied by the statement "Dominance is achieved through the creation of an aura."

Coded images in Fischer's "Media" series imitate the media images that homosexuals have created for themselves. The text decodes the different sources for such imagery, and goes on to scrutinize closely prejudicial, socially reinforcing behavior that such images engender. The archetypal "natural" pose (young man, nude, standing among ferns and trees) is read as a yearning for "natural freedom from social strictures," with a pretense of Whitmanesque romanticism. A "classical" male pose suggests vulgar art-school sessions with its neutral background and the coy attention given to musculature—redeeming social value appropriating an aura of the "artistic." The analysis in each case leads to a demystification of conditioned response—the whole point of valid criticism.

—JEFF PERRONE



Hal Fischer. *Signifiers For a Male Response*, 1977. photograph. 16 x 20".